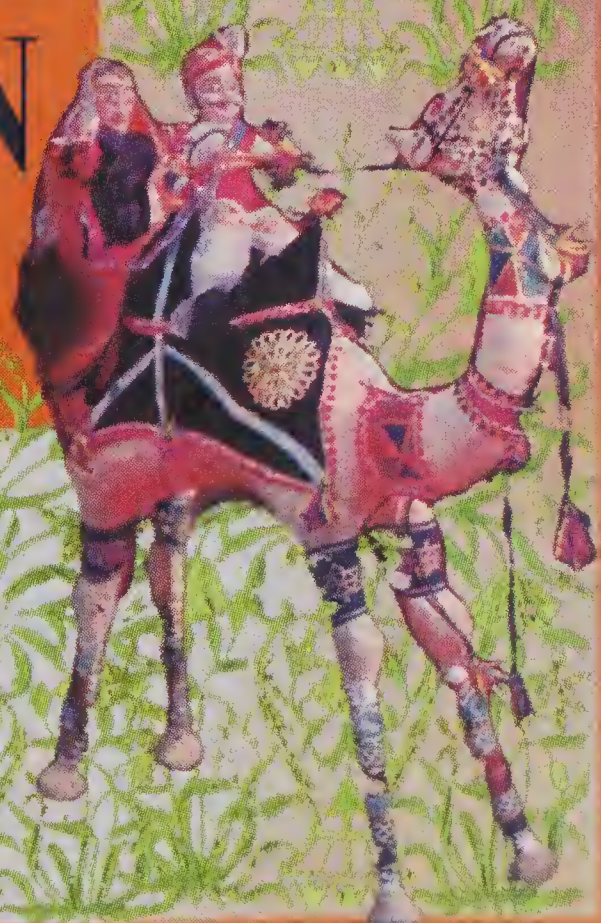
CASTLES IN THE AIR

TALES FROM RAJASTHAN

VIMLA MEHTA



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CASTLES IN THE AIR
Tales From Rajasthan

VIMLA MEHTA

Translator
VEERENDRA RAJ MEHTA

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Dedicated

to

My husband and closest friend

Veerendra Raj Mehta

The Author

Vimla Mehta is a prolific author and writer in Hindi. Writing has interested her since her student days. In college, she edited the house magazine '*Shankh-naad*'. Since 1970, she has so far authored 13 books. The books include *Aaj kee Mahilaye; Asli Jeemakre; Maharana Pratap; Chey Prasidh Mahilayen; Agam ki Kahaniyan; Rajasthan ki Lok Kathayen; Motiyon ka Haar; Toota Hua Bajooband; Annie Besant; Hazaron Taapu – Ek Desh – Philippines; Aansuon ki Bhiksha; Vividha; and Mother Teresa – Inspiring Incidents*. She has contributed over 200 articles in all the leading newspapers and magazines in Hindi. She has contributed articles and presented programmes on All India Radio and Doordarshan. She has also written for BBC, London. She has also been interviewed by BBC and given talks in its programmes.

Vimla Mehta has been intimately associated with charitable work. She is founder Director of Mahaveer Philippines Foundation in Manila for free fitment of *Jaipur foot* in the Philippines. During their stay in Manila, both her husband and she were closely associated with Mother Teresa's work in the Philippines. In 1993, the City of Manila honoured her for her humanitarian work in the Philippines. It accorded her the rare honour of the "Daughter of Manila" and presented her with the 'Key of the City of Manila'.

Preface to the English Edition

A set of interesting folktales of Rajasthan was first compiled in Hindi in the Children's International Year in 1978 and published in 1979. The first story of the collection contributed the title of the book *Asli Jeemakre*. Four subsequent editions were published in 1981, 1992, 1997 and 2000.

In view of the popularity of the book, it was decided to bring out an English edition. My publishers, the Publication Division readily agreed.

The popularity of the book has been a source of joy but not a surprise for me. I had heard the stories in my childhood from relations, acquaintances and helpers. The book largely mirrors the disarming simplicity, purity and natural warmth of the people of Rajasthan. The popularity of the book also emanates from the authenticity of its themes of real life from the hardy life of the villages of Rajasthan. The people are close to nature and environmental protection as a part of their folklore comes naturally to them. Simple entertainment in rustic and uninhibited singing and dancing with gay abandon invariably caps a hard day's work of the villagers. This is why lives here are an ocean of folk songs, folk dances and folk tales.

Translation into English was not as easy as I had anticipated. Initial translations of the book had to be discarded. They were unable to capture the nuances of the culture and environment. As a result, the translation missed the basic messages of the stories. I finally requested my husband Veerendra Raj Mehta to undertake the translation. He kindly agreed to do so. However, the publication had to be postponed from 2005 to 2006 because of his other commitments and preoccupations. I am grateful to him for his painstaking and long effort in finally producing an excellent translation.

The quality of the English translation now before the readers would make the wait worthwhile. Maximum effort has been made to retain the flavour of Rajasthani words in the original text. These words have been retained in Roman script and italicized. Explanatory footnotes have also been provided.

A common feedback received on the earlier Hindi editions was that the title of the book did not reflect that it is a collection of folktales from Rajasthan. This diminished the interest of the general lay reader selecting books at any bookshop or bookstall. The title of the book has therefore been changed to **Castles In The Air – Tales From Rajasthan**.

My thanks are due to the Publications Division and its Director and other officers. Their support and encouragement has made the publication of this edition possible.

1 June 2006

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Preface to the Hindi Edition

Rajasthan is ingrained in my soul like the aroma that emanates from water in a newly cast earthen pitcher. Something inexplicably binds me to this land of barren but golden sand and sand dunes more than any other state of India. While sitting in the suffocating environment of air-conditioned rooms, I am reminded of my childhood days and the cool and pleasant open-air nights that we enjoyed on terraces atop our ancestral *Haveli*[1] in this sandy land. The memories of my childhood and innocent youth are still fresh in my mind. I vividly remember the disarming simplicity, purity and natural warmth of my own people that I witnessed and enjoyed in those days. What a contrast it was from the artificial culture of 'Hi's' and 'Hellos' now routinely observed in the schools, colleges, clubs etc.

Rajasthan has probably the largest amount of folk literature that is available among the Indian states. It emanates largely from an inexhaustible abundance of the two very special human traits in the people of Rajasthan – self-respect and a zest to live. Pride has a preeminent place in their lives. The people of this land live with pride and die with pride. Simple entertainment in rustic and uninhibited singing and dancing with gay abandon invariably caps a hard day's work. This is why lives here are an ocean of folk songs, folk dances and folk tales.

I have vivid memories of the innumerable folklore that I heard during my childhood years. These tales came from my grandmother, mother and aunts. The folktales told by our domestic servants, including our favourite vegetable vendor Mangibai too are deeply ensconced in the deepest nooks and corners of my heart. There was always the risk of getting initial affectionate rebuffs. Persistence was however rewarded with stories. The storytellers included Tongawala[2] Laluji, the female drummer Gabribai and grain loader Bapuji. My sweetest memories are those of the tales fondly narrated to us by our dear masseur Sukribai. The terrace atop our multi-storied family *haveli* served as the open-air group bedroom for all the children of the house. There would be a neat arrangement of rows of mattresses covered with spotlessly white bed sheets. The cool nights on the terrace were a great balm and a pleasant and much-awaited change from the scorching and sapping heat of the extremely hot desert days. Sukribai's story-telling sessions would begin when we would have retired to bed but had still not fallen asleep. We would listen to her with rapt attention. Above, the shining stars and heavenly bodies, clearly visible in the cloudless desert skies, continued their celestial movements. Especially interesting were the tales of gods and goddesses retold at festivals times.

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[1] Usually refers to a sprawling ancestral mansion

[2] Driver of a traditional horse-cart

I later learnt with pleasant surprise that the stories that I had gathered were a part of our rich heritage and these are found in our old epics and other folk literature of Rajasthan. The passage of time had neither altered their basic content or character nor diminished their value. This is indeed the great characteristic of any rich folklore.

Tales of *Dhola-Marvan, Sheel-satam, Kalo-naag, Gangour, Savani-Teej, Bach-baras* etc., are some of the very popular Rajasthani folktales already familiar for a large readership. In this book, my effort has been to assemble a collection of folk tales, which are interesting but less well known.

1979 Vimla Mehta

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CASTLES IN THE AIR

NEAR the city of Pipar there was a small village. A cobbler named Dhablu lived there. Dhablu was very poor. He used to earn some money by making and repairing *pagarkhis*[3]. He had a small farm too. Dhablu's wife Teeja worked in the farm.

Dhablu had no cows or buffalos. As a result, Teeja used to make door-to-door visits in the village to obtain some buttermilk. Sometimes she was lucky to get some and at other times, she came back empty handed. Sometimes the buttermilk would be sour and at other times, it would be watery. The day she was unlucky and came back with an empty tinkling vessel, the whole family had to eat dry *rotis*[4] only.[5]

One day Dhablu was making *pagarkhis* for the village moneylender. Teeja was looking for an opportune moment for sharing an important thought that she had been nursing in her mind for some time. Considering it to be the right time, Teeja said, "Listen *Geegla's* father[6]! Get me a buffalo. Otherwise I have to go from door to door and virtually beg to get some buttermilk." Dhablu laughed and said, "Are you nuts? How are we to acquire a buffalo? How do we feed it? On days you do not get buttermilk, prepare some *chutney*[7]. Chutney made from red-green chilies, salt and *kaachra*[8] tastes wonderful with millet *rotis*." In a mouth-watering gesture, Dhablu smacked his tongue.

But Teeja had set her heart on acquiring a buffalo. She had already made castles in the air. She said, "You just get a buffalo. I will then show you - you just watch how it pays for itself. We will recover from sale of milk and ghee as much as we spend on the fodder for the buffalo. In addition, we will get free buttermilk and cow-dung. We will have a plentiful supply of fresh homemade buttermilk, maximizing our enjoyment. I will be able to make dishes of millet and *khatti ghat* (sour porridge) too. Sometimes

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[3] Hand-crafted Rajasthani footwear, sometimes with artistic and colourful embroidery..

[4] Flat rolled pancake like traditional leavened Indian bread.

[5] Some poor families can not always afford vegetables or other accompaniments to go with eating of *rotis* and make do with buttermilk and in its absence some *chutney* or sauce made by grinding together red chillies, salt and some locally abundant berries.

[6] The husband is referred to as his son Geegla's father. In olden days, as a mark of respect, it was a custom for women not to call their husbands by name. Instead they would be called as so-and-so's father or so-and-so's brother or by naming any other relation and his/her relationship with the husband.

[7] It is a ground paste generally of a base of coriander or mint leaves. Other condiments and ingredients are added according to availability and taste.

[8] A desert fruit that grows on a creeper.

we would be able to enjoy hot buttermilk with red chillies. Or else we could eat *rotis* dipped in buttermilk. I will use the cow-dung to plaster the house[9]. I will also make dry cakes of cow-dung for lighting kitchen fire. The residual cow-dung will serve as excellent organic manure. Use of manure will enable us to get better yields in our farm. Do you now realize how profitable the acquisition would be? And, yes! I will then not have to go from door to door to beg for buttermilk. I will no longer get blisters on my feet while collecting cow-dung cakes in summer in the scorching heat in the forest. If we have our own buffalo, all our hardships will disappear.

Dhablu felt impressed with Teeja's logic. He never credited her with much

[9] Cow-dung is commonly used as a cheap substitute in poor village households for plastering – it is considered to have antiseptic properties and is cool in summer and warm in winter.

intelligence. However, this day Dhablu felt that for the first time his wife was talking sense. Leaving his work he said, "Dearest! I am impressed with your wise talk. It is very pleasing to the ears to hear of the possible future benefits. But how are we to get a buffalo? It requires lots of money and lots of gleaming silver coins. We do not even have a baked mud coin."

Teeja rearranged her veil[10] and excitedly said, "I have already thought about it before I opened my mouth." Then slightly lifting her dense eighty-pleat *ghagra*[11] and revealing her anklets, she said, "I have been wearing these heavy silver anklets for over ten years and even after all the wear and tear, they would still be weighing no less than one and a half quarters of a kilo. Further, my silver necklace also weighs about one quarter of a kilo. We could sell these. We could also look for some assistance from the village moneylender. What better opportunity could there be for him to help us? When you go to him with the beautiful *pagarkhis* that you can make for him, he is sure to give us some loan. After all it is only a loan that we shall be seeking."

Dhablu greatly appreciated both her reasoning and the calculations. He was now convinced that it was a practical and workable plan. He said, "Today I have to go to the grocery shop owner. I will buy some millet in exchange for these *pagarkhis*. While returning I also have to get an earthen-pitcher from the potter. I will go to the moneylender tomorrow."

At Dhablu's mention of the potter's name, it instantly occurred to Teeja that when they get a buffalo they would need to regularly churn the milk for separating butter and buttermilk. She said, "Since you are going to the potter, then please get for me two black earthen *handis*[12] for churning, two strong earthen *parats*[13] and two small *kulhadis*[14]. I can myself get the wooden churner and the stirrer from the carpenter."

Dhablu said, "Oh Geegla's *dhaa*[15] [16]. I do understand the need for the *handis*, *parats* and the churner. But why do you need two earthen *kulhadis*? What is the purpose? I do not see any possible use for them."

Teeja animatedly waved her hand and said, "How will you? You forget that I have a mother. I need two *kulhadis* to take fresh yoghurt to her every day, in the morning and evening. Now is that clear?" Teeja was already day dreaming of a buffalo and milk and yoghurt flowing in her house!

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[10] In some villages, in public, the women commonly use an *odhani* or mantilla as a veil.

[11] A long pleated skirt, a commonly worn dress of Indian women along with *sari*.

[12] These are relatively deep earthen bowls used for storage or for cooking on fire.

[13] These are flat bowl shaped earthen plates.

[14] These are small disposable earthen cups commonly used in villages.

[15] Mother is also called *dhaa*.

[16] It is to be noted that even in the present era, in many villages not only does the wife not use the husband's name but the husband also does not call his wife by her name but by mentioning her relationship with her son or some other close relative.

Hearing of the talk of giving yoghurt to his wife's mother twice daily, Dhablu was enraged. He said, "Where is the need to give yoghurt etc., to your mother. If you will keep distributing yoghurt like that, then I see no way in which we would get our butter and ghee." And raising the pitch of his voice, he imperiously continued, "You dare not entertain such thoughts again? I am warning you now."

Teeja was not the one to give up. She stuck to her guns and said, "I do not care whether you agree or not, or like it or not. I will take the top layer of the creamy milk to make separate yoghurt for my mother and carry it to her both times in those little *kulhadis*. My mother loves yoghurt. Let me see, who stops me?"

Dhablu was infuriated and thundered, "I will stop you, who else?" Dhablu thereafter started abusing her and said, "Has your father bought us the buffalo? Or did you bring it as a part of your dowry from your parents?" He now snapped a fresh thick green twig from a nearby *Neem* tree. Waving the twig in a threatening gesture, Dhablu now said, "Do you still maintain that you will send yoghurt to your mother?"

The threats made Teeja even more defiant. She said, "Yes, for sure I will. Not once, but a hundred times! I will see who has the guts to stop me. You think that there will be a buffalo in my house and my mother will yearn for yoghurt. If you entertain such thoughts, you can by all means, not offer milk to your own mother. Come what may, my mother will always get to eat yoghurt."

Dhablu mocked her, "Then here…first you satisfy your hunger for yoghurt with this". Dhablu then started beating Teeja with the fresh thick *Neem* twig he had just snapped from the tree. One-two-three – *saddaak! saddaak! saddaak*! The sound of the lashes reverberated in the air. Teeja started screaming. "Oh, mother, he will beat me to death!"

Teeja remembering her mother further fuelled Dhablu's temper. He said, "You will still send yoghurt? Speak out! You …?"

But Teeja was unbending. Even while she was being mercilessly lashed, she asserted again that whatever happens, she would surely give yoghurt to her mother. Dhablu was seething with anger at this total defiance. His lashing had failed to bend her. He was now furious and took off his *pagarkhis*. He now started hitting Teeja with the metal studded soles of his *pagarkhis* – the lashing and the hits with *pagarkhi* studs had ripped off Teeja's skin. She was bleeding profusely.

Teeja's screams became louder. The village merchant was returning from a near-by village. When he heard a woman's pathetic screams, he turned in that direction. He was shocked to see that the origin was Dhablu's house. He saw that Dhablu was beating his wife black and blue. Her blouse was torn and on her bare back, he could see blood and the numerous red marks of lashing.

The merchant swiftly snatched the twig from Dhablu and said, "You foolish creature! Have you gone mad? What is the matter? Why are you beating her so brutally and bent upon killing this powerless woman?"

Dhablu had to depend a lot on the goodwill of the village merchant for his frequent requirements of short-term loans for buying finishing and raw materials for the manufacture of *pagarkhis*. He therefore did not want do anything that could even remotely be disliked by him. He truthfully told the merchant the sequence of events. The merchant was a shrewd person. When he heard Dhablu's narration, he could clearly see how foolish both Dhablu and Teeja had been. They were now quarreling over an imagined event. There was no buffalo anywhere in sight. None had been purchased at all. Milk and yoghurt were even more imaginary. Yet this fight for distribution of yoghurt and milk! Dhablu was stupid enough to beat his wife mercilessly. Teeja was equally foolish in obstinately insisting on supplying non-existent milk and yoghurt to her mother. Both were living in a surreal world. The merchant was surprised at their foolishness. However, the immediate physical suffering was of Teeja. He therefore wanted to teach Dhablu a lesson.

He turned around and without any warning started whipping Dhablu with the same thick *Neem* twig and said, "You lazy fellow! What are you sitting here for? Go and see for yourself what mess your buffalo has created in my farms. It has eaten up all my fresh crop of wheat. Why did you leave your buffalo in my farm? Why? Why did you leave it there at all?" You are responsible for my damage.

Even though he was getting a thrashing, Dhablu was speechless. He said, "Oh Sir! I do not even possess a buffalo. Why are you thrashing me?"

Then the merchant said, "You fool! Do you now get the message? When you do not even possess a buffalo, then where is the question of supply of yoghurt to Teeja's mother in the *kulhadis*? There is neither a buffalo nor any yoghurt? Still you cruelly beat your wife. In addition, this silly woman too is no less a fool. Imagine! She is insisting to send milk and yoghurt to her mother even before a buffalo is anywhere in sight? You forgot that you had both built castles in the air. There was absolutely no basis for the real abuse and fight that you indulged in."

Dhablu realized his foolishness. The village merchant's shrewdness impressed him immensely. No wonder the village merchant was able to make huge profits from most of the village artisans, and they were almost invariably in debt to him. The moneylender's debt even swallowed their buffaloes!

❑

REAL GOURMETS

There was a small village near the kingdom of Pokaran consisting of a cluster of ten-fifteen houses. It had a total population of around forty-to-fifty inhabitants. It was called the village of gourmets. The people of this village loved to go to feasts. They did not at all relish home cooked food. A simple *dal-roti*[17] meal was not their cup of tea. Irrespective of whether it was a marriage celebration or a tonsure event or a death anniversary feast, these gluttons would make their way to the feast – they would just reach there. They did not need or wait for any invitation to reach them. They were familiar faces for the public of Pokaran.

Feeding these uninvited guests for years, the residents of Pokaran were now getting sick of them. These gluttons had gradually extended their sphere of activity and were reaching even the near-by villages. They would hardly miss information of any feast in Pokaran and nearby villages. People would be surprised how the gluttons got the scent of any feast miles away and be sure to reach there at the appointed hour. They would always be at the right feast at the right time. They would impose their presence even when the host was reluctant to entertain them – asserting that they were the true gourmets and had a right to enjoy every feast. Since no one was inclined to get involved in an awkward altercation particularly on any happy or solemn occasion where a large number of guests were generally present, invariably the gourmets had their way and fed themselves to their heart's content. Even on sad occasions such as death anniversaries, the hosts would tolerate and let them eat so that the solemnity of the occasion was not disturbed. They also believed that peace on these occasions would keep the deceased souls in the other world happy. Even on the rare occasions when someone tried to drive them away, they would obstinately stay put and just not go away without feasting.

Once, it was the occasion of the wedding of the son of the city-merchant's son. The marriage party comprising the men folk had accompanied the groom to bride's home in another village. After the marriage party had left for the bride's village, these gluttons made their way to the city-merchant's house. Only women of the house were there. The women protested at their arrival but they would not listen and helped themselves with the available dishes and sweets with great relish.

Next day when the marriage party returned, the city-merchant, the influential master of the house, learnt of the cheeky behaviour of the gluttons. He was angry at their insolence but could not think of an immediate solution. He however felt there was

[17] A traditional minimal North Indian meal of cooked legumes (*dal*) and flat rolled pancake like traditional leavened Indian bread. (*roti or chappati*)

an urgent need to devise some permanent solution to the problem of these uninvited guests who were regularly pestering the whole community. He concluded that only the king could do something to eradicate this statewide menace. He accordingly decided to take the issue to King Pratap Singh.

He did not waste time. The next day he sought an audience with the King. He narrated to the King in detail how the gluttons forced their entry uninvited everywhere

and thrived on hosts' reluctance to have a stir at the festive or solemn occasions. The King had earlier also received similar complaints about these gluttons but was not quite sure how to handle them. The village of the gluttons was not a part of his kingdom. It was under the rule of King Anoop Singh. That King was a very good friend of his but Pratap Singh did not want to ruin his friendship with Anoop Singh by directly acting against the latter's residents. However, since the complaints were mounting, he resolved to look for the earliest opportunity in his own kingdom to teach the gluttons a lesson.

Soon enough an opportunity arose. King Pratap Singh's daughter was getting married on the festival day of '*Akha Teej*'[18] . The palace of Pokaran was lavishly bedecked. Emperors and kings were arriving on their richly decorated horses and elephants. The palace was echoing with the sweet musical melodies from clarinets and kettledrums. Every nook and corner of the Palace smelled of various kinds of fragrant aroma.

The marriage party had arrived. King Pratap Singh was busy welcoming the guests and looking after them. A number of richly festooned tents had also been pitched up to serve as the dining and the sitting halls. Dinner was organized in a cluster of tents in one corner. It was served on low stools that were intricately carved. They had sandalwood top and silver legs. Food was served to the guests in double-bottomed[19] silver plates and bowls of gold. Earthen pitchers stored flavored cold drinking water.

The members of the marriage party had just got up after having their food when the gluttons appeared on the scene. The organizers decided against stopping them and creating a stir on this auspicious occasion. They wished to avoid an undesirable commotion. They reasoned to themselves that if thousands of invited guests were to dine anyway, feeding a mere forty-fifty additional uninvited persons would not matter. Accordingly, the organizers exercising their discretion decided to keep mum in the matter.

The organizers were preparing to serve these uninvited persons when someone informed King Pratap Singh about the arrival of the gluttons. The King was surprised at their audacity to gate crash even into the privacy of his palace. He quickly recognized it as just the opportunity and the moment he was looking for, to teach these gluttons a lesson.

He quietly headed towards the tent where food was being laid out for them. He saw that they were about forty-fifty people waiting, comfortably seated on luxurious mattresses interspersed with bolsters and cushions. These included old and young, and women and children. The organizers were getting ready to serve the food. The unexpected arrival of the King caused a big commotion. The King did not waste time and sternly asked the gluttons,

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[18] Also known as *Akshya Tritiya*. It is considered an auspicious day. It is considered particularly auspicious for marriages. For this reason it is also a day of mass marriages in Rajasthan

[19] The lower compartment of the double-bottomed plates was filled with hot water to keep the meals warm.

"Where do you come from?"

"From the village of gourmets", a man paid courtesy and answered.

"Introduce yourself", the King ordered.

"My lord! Our introduction is simple. We are all gourmets", the man said fearlessly but with respect.

"Which caste do you belong to?", the King again asked.

"Lord! We have no other caste. We are called the gourmets since generations."

"What business are you in?" The King continued in a stern tone.

"To grace lavish feasts with our presence and dine there, my Lord!" The headman answered, without any signs of being overawed.

"Did you receive any invitation?" was King's next query

"Sir, we do not need to be invited. It is our right and profession to go to feasts. The aroma of food in the air tells us the address. We simply follow the direction of our nose."

Putting on a smile, the King said "OK! I will accept you all as my guests. Please take your seats.", and then quickly left. On the way, he whispered some instructions to his minister. The minister bowed to the king and left.

The gluttons were amazed at the way things had turned out. Instead of being challenged, scolded or thrown out, they had been accepted. They were delighted at this unexpected seal of approval and acceptance at the King's palace. They now hoped that such recognition at the highest level would also help them handle the city-merchants in future.

Just then, they saw the minister approaching them with a retinue of about fifty helpers. Each was carrying two flat short wooden splints and some rope. The minister came and stood near the place where the gluttons were to be served with their dinner. On his signal, the individual servants positioned themselves near each one of the uninvited guests. As soon they got a signal from the minister, the servants proceeded to tightly tie the wooden splints on each of the hands of the gourmets from the wrist to the armpit. With the strips, the hands could no longer be folded at the elbow and had to be kept straight. Within a short time, all the gluttons had splints tied to their hands. Each of them was straight jacketed in an identical fashion.

Most of the gluttons got scared. The old were aghast. The women and children started crying. However, the organizers did not relent. They were acting under instructions from the King himself. Soon, steaming and delicious dishes were served. The gluttons were now mockingly invited to enjoy the feast. The cruelty of the King's

joke was now evident to them. How were they to eat? How were the straightjacketed hands going to feed the mouth, without bending at the elbows?

At this moment, the gluttons saw King Partap Singh heading in their direction. He had his sword in his hand. Everyone was terrified. Old men kept their eyes low. The women and children were awed and speechless. The young got too scared and started running away. The old and the women and children followed suit. When the soldiers tried to stop them, the King ordered, "Do not stop them". He then announced that those who want to go away could do so. Most of them heaved a sigh of relief and quickly ran off. Only two of them stayed on. The King menacingly stood before them but they kept sitting bravely. The King taunted them sharply. "You hungry beggars! Now demonstrate to me that you are professional gourmets. How do you propose eating the feast?"

The two looked suggestively at each other from the corner of their eyes and in a flash devised a plan by some simple signals. They had accepted the King's challenge. Both now got up and sat on the opposite sides of a dining table. Then one of them lifted his straightjacketed hands to pick up food from the plate of his colleague on the other side of the table and fed him. There was no need to bend the hand at the elbow! Now it was the turn of the other person. He similarly picked food from the plate of his colleague on the other side and fed him. Again, there was no need to bend the hand at the elbow. They took turns in feeding each other in this fashion and enjoyed all the delicacies to their heart's content. The straightjacketed hands could not defeat them.

The King could not but marvel at their cleverness and nodded his head in acknowledgement of their ingenuity. His anger had given way to appreciation. His happiness on this auspicious occasion of his daughter's marriage had now doubled. He declared, "Only you two are the true gourmets. Those who ran away were phony. From now onwards, in my kingdom you can go uninvited to any feast and dine wherever you want. No one in the kingdom of Pokaran will ever stop you."

The two gourmets had a big smile on their faces. With their hands still tied, they gratefully bowed to the King. The minister who had been a stupefied witness to the whole drama now woke up and untied the wooden strips from their hands. Now that their hands were free, both of them once again set down for another round of dinner. Just to demonstrate to everyone present that the two were indeed the true gourmets! They were now honoured and proud guests at the wedding. The King finally bade them goodbye by gifting them with caparisoned camels and beautiful clothes etc.

When the gourmets returned home in their beautiful dresses on royal camels, the villagers rubbed their eyes in disbelief. Instead of seeing their corpses, they saw them proudly entering the village. How did this miracle happen? Somehow, they seemed to have been rewarded by the King. Both the gourmets enjoyed the attention that they now received. They narrated for many days to their incredulous kin many an exaggerated version of the tale. They used to hear it with rapt attention and repent that they had run away on that fateful day. If only they had kept up their inherited tradition!

From then on, the two 'true' gourmets would proudly go to feasts on their camels. Wherever they went, people wholeheartedly welcomed them. ❑

TIT FOR TAT

JAMNA was a wily Jat[20] woman. She lived in Jhunjhunu village. She held her sway in the whole village. Her total domination overawed even her in-laws.

Badri was Jamna's son. He was a wrestler who could pin down any of the wrestlers in the village but was scared to open his mouth in the presence of his mother. Before his marriage, Badri was wise enough to inform his beautiful wife, Suvati, that in their house, his Mother's writ ran and no one dared question her. Anything in the house had to be done as per her wishes. All decisions whether relating to social parleys or family visits and get-togethers or financial transactions or any other activity were to be as per her desires and direction. Suvati fully imbibed the advice of her husband and acted accordingly. This ensured peace in the house.

One day, Jamna had gone to jungle to collect dry firewood. She was returning with a head-load of wood Her head was spinning because of the heat. She was walking slowly. On her way, she met a *pandit* (a Brahmin). She greeted him saying, "*Panditji, Pai lagoon*[21]" and simultaneously made a gesture of touching his feet. However, his response was an outburst of anger. He informed her that he would never ever again go to her house for alms. In an attempt to provoke her, he added, "Even if I did not get a handful of flour from your house, it would not make me any poorer! There are many other prosperous households in the village were I can easily get alms."

When Jamna asked the *panditji*[22] why he was so infuriated, he said, "Today I went to your house for alms. Your daughter-in-law insulted me. She refused to give me flour. She is probably not aware that I do not visit your house for alms every day. Today I had visited your house after almost a fortnight. Still your daughter-in-law refused to give me flour. In this *Kaliyuga*[23], the daughter-in-laws seem to be ruling the households everywhere! It seems to be the same story even your house. Today I have seen a first-hand proof of this."

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[20] Name of a large community mainly engaged in agriculture in western Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan.

[21] Touching of feet is a common from of greeting elders with respect. The expression *Pai lagoon* literally meaning 'I touch your feet' is used as a substitute for actual touching of feet.

[22] The suffix *ji* is used as a mark of respect.

[23] In the age cycle of Hindu thought, there are four yugas e.g., *Kritayuga, Tretayuga, Dwaparyuga* and the current *Kaliyuga* each of very long duration. These yugas decrease successively in excellence and righteousness of humanity. In *Kaliyug*, humanity has acquired most vices and immoral attributes.

Jamna got enraged. Angrily she said, "*Panditji!* How dare my daughter-in-law return you empty handed. My husband and I are both still earning. My daughter-in-law's husband is not running the household for us. There is plenty of flour in the house. What if she has a pretty face? She did not bring to us any dowry of camels or oxen. Her father had bid her marriage farewell merely with her draped in a red *chunri*[24] sari. Then, why this arrogance? How dare she deny a *panditji* like you? Come along, I will find out right away!"

In his heart of his hearts, the *pandit* was very happy that he was able to incite the mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law. He hoped to profit handsomely from this proverbial mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law rift cleverly fanned by him. He visualized loads of alms. He was happy that his strategy was working. However, as an outward gesture to please Jamna and keep her in good humour, he offered to relieve

[24] *Chunri* is a special form of tie and die printing. This colourful printing of fabrics originated in Rajasthan. Fabrics with this type of printing are now very popular in India and abroad.

her of her head load. Jamna was quite pleased to be rid of her head-load on this hot day and promptly agreed. The *pandit* now stepped forward and lifted it on his head. Relieved of her load, Jamna happily walked ahead and the *pandit* followed her.

When they reached her home, Jamna helped the *pandit* unload the bundle and then stormed into the house. Speaking angrily in a loud voice that was meant to be heard by the *pandit*, she asked Suvati, "Tell me, since when have you become the mistress of the house. Such a knowledgeable *panditji* came to our house and you sent him back? What is such a big deal in a bowl of flour? Who gave you the authority to say no to him without my permission? How can you take a decision while I am still alive?" "How dare you?" she repeated with even greater vehemence.

Having reasserted her authority on the domestic front, she came out and sternly told the *pandit*, "There is no flour here. Now turn around, follow the direction of your nose and get lost. You will sure find some other donor. As long as I am alive, the daughter-in-law is no one to say no to you. Even if someone has to say no to you, it has to be me. Therefore, in exercise of that authority of mine, I now deny you any bowl of flour. Now you can go."

The *pandit* was aghast. Jamna had been very cunning with him. She not only gave him no flour but cleverly made him carry a head load of firewood all the way from

the forest to her home. Wiping his baldhead, sore from the weight of the bundle, the downcast *pandit* walked away. The woman had utterly humiliated him. It was too high a price to pay for a bowl of flour. Swallowing the insult, he looked forward to an appropriate moment to avenge.

A few days later, Jamna's sick old mother-in-law passed away. After the funeral, the family called the *pandit* to assist in the ritual of immersing her ashes in river Ganga at Haridwar. In normal circumstances, he would have seriously considered such assignments that involved long travel but realizing that this was a godsent opportunity to avenge his earlier humiliation, he agreed. Flashbacks of his past dishonour came back to his mind like a cinema reel. He muttered to himself, 'This is my chance to avenge. If I am not able to make her pay now for at least thousand bowls of flour for that day's insult, I should quit this profession'.

The household of the *pandit's* father-in-law was about a hundred miles before Haridwar. It required a substantial expenditure of money to get there from *panditji's* hometown of Jhunjhunu. He had not been able to set aside that kind of money and could not avail of the hospitality of his in-laws since years. The *pandit* quickly figured out that this was his chance to travel there. He could enjoy the hospitality of his father-in-law at the expense of the wily woman, without spending even a *paisa* of his own. The *pandit* was already making mental plans. He remembered that there was a small shallow pond in that village and he could well throw the ashes in that pond and return back to his hometown Jhunjhunu. In his plan, a travel further down to Haridwar made no sense.

The *pandit* accordingly traveled only to his in-laws' house. He was clever enough to make a mental calculation that it required 5 days to go and return from Haridwar. He therefore returned to Jhunjhunu after spending exactly 5 days at his in-laws' place. Unaware of the *pandit's* deceit, Jamna reimbursed him for all his expenses and additionally rewarded him with some gifts.

After some time, Jamna came to know that the *pandit* never went to Haridwar. She also knew that instead he had just made a trip to his father-in-law's place for enjoying his hospitality, all at her expense. Jamna felt highly cheated. She was enraged. She quickly thought out something and hurriedly went to the *pandit's* house. There she learned that the *pandit* had gone to the house of the village headman. Jamna considered it a good opportunity.

She rushed straight to the headman's house. The village headman and many village elite were present in his veranda, chatting with each other. In the presence of everyone, Jamna addressed the *pandit, "Panditji*, last night I saw my mother-in-law in my dream. She said that her soul is wandering around, because *panditji* never immersed her ashes in Ganga at Haridwar. Instead he had thrown them into some shallow pond."

Heaving a big a sigh, the Jat woman continued, "*Panditji,* you have to now go back, all the way to Haridwar, and perform the ritual in correct manner. Else my mother-in-law's soul will not rest. It will keep wandering and haunting you and me both."

Realizing that he was being exposed in the presence of the whole elite of the village, *panditji* initially became nervous. He thought to himself that if the gathering believed the woman's story, he would lose his status in the village as a respected *pandit*. He will then have to forget altogether about the future offerings and donations in the village. Quickly composing himself and drawing on his sharp intellect, he said, "You seem to have gone crazy. Do you not remember your mother-in-law and her habits? Leaving you at home to carry out the strenuous work in the kitchen and other household chores, she would happily roam around in the village. She still has that wandering habit. Just think about it. If she can return to her village in your dreams, why could she not also go straight to Haridwar? Did someone stop her? No. The fact is that your mother-in-law has this old habit of wandering about. She has come back from Haridwar too. I am absolutely certain that she will herself go back to Ganga when she gets tired of walking around."

Jamna was speechless. If she now said anything, it would only reflect ill on her dead mother-in-law. She felt defeated.

The *pandit* was smiling. The sarcasm behind his smile pierced Jamna's heart. Nevertheless, she was helpless. The *pandit* was smarter than she was. He had indeed made her pay for thousand bowls of flour for that one refused bowl of flour!

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SETHANI THE LAXMI

SETH[25] Ratanlal lived in the city of Pali. He was a very simple person. However, Ratanlal was a rich man with immense wealth, including a sprawling three-storeyed house. He was a trader of grains, dry fruits and cloth. He also ran a financing business. His ancestors going back to seven generations had also been in the same business. There was no dearth of money. But he was very simple. He easily reposed trust on everyone in business matters. People often cheated Ratanlal because of his trusting nature. Over time, this adversely affected his business. Slowly there was depletion of the ancestral wealth. Ratanlal was now a worried man.

His *Sethani*[26] was very intelligent. She too was worried. She told her husband that if things kept going the way they were, soon their house as well as her jewellery would have to be pawned. She suggested that he take up another business. But Ratanlal was in a dilemma. He did not know which new business to start. He had already tried his hand in trading and financing. However, everywhere it was the same story because of his trusting nature.

Luckily, Pali had abundant rainfall that year. After three years of total drought, the dry scorched earth had now once again become fertile. All kind of seeds sown were sprouting well. Creepers of cucumbers, *kacherey*[27] and *balam-kakadi*[28] were flourishing and loaded with fruits.

The *Sethani* advised her husband, "You visit farms and buy cucumbers at a wholesale rate. Then set up a shop at the vegetable market and sell your goods there in retail. God willing, you will surely make handsome profits."

The merchant did not like the idea at all. With a sad look, he said, "My dear wife! I am a trader's son, not the progeny of a vegetable vendor. Today you are asking me to sell cucumbers. Tomorrow you will ask me to sow it. I am not getting in the business of setting up a cucumber shop!"

The *Sethani* remained patient. She calmly explained, "It is all a figment of your imagination. You must use your intelligence and understand the basic issue. No work is small. Whether you sell gold and silver or you sell cucumber, it is all the same. It is all trading business. If you handle the cucumber trading cleverly, even this business could be a gold mine."

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[25] A wealthy merchant.

[26] The wife of a *Seth*.

[27] A desert fruit that grows on a creeper.

[28] Also a variety of cucumber.

The merchant now understood *Sethani's* logic and nodded his head in recognition of her wisdom. Having convinced him to take up the business, she also suggested that he carry out the trading in cash only. She strongly advised him against selling any merchandise on credit.

Very early next morning, the *Seth* went to the farms and procured lot of vegetables at wholesale rates. At night, his wife had spruced up the long-stored brass scales for him. He was now ready for starting his retail shop. Taking his shiny scales and weights, he selected a prominent crossing in the heart of the vegetable market for his shop. He did good business that day. Following his wife's advice, he sold the goods only on cash payment.

By dusk, he was left with only about forty kg of vegetables. Just then four ladies with veiled faces came to his shop. Each one bought 10 kg of vegetables. They then bundled the goods in their own big bags and started to leave. The simple *Seth* was in a panic and could barely mutter, "Ladies! My money! Please pay for the goods before you leave."

The four women said almost in chorus, "Right now we don't have any money. Take it tomorrow morning!"

The *Seth* quickly stood up and said, "I do not know you. In addition, you all have these mighty long two feet veils! I cannot even see your faces. Who shall I collect my money from? At least show me your faces."

All the four women tightly held their veils and said, "We all belong to respectable families. We do not go about showing our faces to everyone and anyone in the market. Do you understand?" Again, they started walking away.

The poor merchant followed them saying, "Oh respectable ladies! I do not know where you live. Tell me your addresses at least. Where does each one of you live?"

The first woman turned and said, "House in the palm! That is my house!"

Sharply turning around, the second woman said, "House in the mouth! That is my house!"

Shuffling her stance, the third woman said, "House in the fragrance! That is my house! "

The fourth woman smiled and said, "House in a house! That is my house!"

Saying this they all quickly turned into the narrow lane and walked away. The poor *Seth* stood shell-shocked. The descriptions of their respective addresses were riddles that made no sense to him. They completely puzzled him. Had they been males, he would have physically stopped them. He kept wondering if he could have said something different or handled those women in some other way to stop them. He was thinking within himself. Could he have said or done something different in dealing with the four women without creating a commotion in the heart of the market?

This incident apart, he was happy at the day's sale and collection. He had made good profit. It was now time to close shop. He picked up the weights and scales as well as the collected cash and started walking home. He also kept cramming the addresses described by the four women. He reached home with the riddles of addresses etched in his memory.

The *Sethani* was very happy to see the day's collection and the profit. Seeing his wife happy, the merchant made bold and hesitatingly said, "For the entire day, I sold nothing on credit. However, towards the evening four stranger veiled women defeated me. They each took 10 kg of vegetables, bundled it in their bags. They then just walked away with the goods without paying. The women gave their addresses in riddles only that make no sense to me."

The *Seth* continued, "One by one, they described their addresses thus:

"House in the palm! That is my house!"

"House in the mouth! That is my house!"

"House in the fragrance! That is my house!"

"House in the house!. That is my house!"

I do not understand it. Do you make out anything from these descriptions? If you do, please share it with me."

Having unloaded his mind of the riddles, he gave the bag of money to her. The *Sethani* kept the bag in the house safe, and said, "All four women were smart. If my understanding is correct, their description of the addresses was clever but truthful. They seem to have given the correct addresses." She now took a jibe at her husband and said, "Now if someone has no brains at all, how would he understand them?"

Then she explained in detail. "house in palm" refers to henna[29]. Its leaves are used by women to make wet paste that is utilized for creating colourful and decorative motifs on the palms of their hands (and also on their feet). Therefore, the house, which has a henna plant outside it, is the house of the first woman. The next woman had described her house as "the house in mouth". Teeth are in the mouth, and ivory is the teeth (tusks) of elephant. The reference is thus to ivory. That woman clearly has a shop of ivory bangles. The woman who said "house in the fragrance" has a business of perfumes. That is why she says house in the fragrance. Finally, the "house in house" means home of a shop owner dealing in coconut. A coconut has an outer coir covering and shell and within it is the edible coconut.

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[29] Henna is a plant called *mehendi* in Hindi. A *mehendi* plant at the entrance of a home is considered a good omen . After drying, the motifs made from henna paste last a few days.

The merchant was speechless. He said, "You are really brilliant. But now if your guess is wrong and I don't find these houses, I will sure give up this business!"

The *Sethani* proudly retorted, "If men had any intelligence, they would not toil in the market place. Like women, they would then enjoy the comforts of their luxurious homes. But because they lack intelligence, they have to work hard outside their homes while women enjoy the luxuries at home."

Next morning the merchant went to the addresses explained by his wife. Not even once did he need to ask or seek further directions. Not once did he turn around. He easily found all the four houses. All the four veiled women made full payment of the money due to him.

The merchant happily returned home after getting his money due. Giving the bag of money to his wife, he said, "I have got the entire due amount. You are the winner, and I lose. Now explain to me one more thing. When those women gave me the money, each one said, "Here is *Laxmi* for *Laxmi*". I do not understand the meaning. It is again a riddle for me. What did they really mean?"

Proudly playing with the bag of money, the *Sethani* said, "The first *Laxmi* in the riddle is for the money[30] they paid and the second *Laxmi* is for the lady of the house who by her wisdom creates and preserves wealth in the house. What I have in my hand in this bag is thus *Laxmi,* the money. The second reference to *Laxmi* in this case is obviously a reference to me as it was by my intelligence that you first got into this profitable business and were then able to recover the dues from all the four house addresses. That is the reason why the four women said, "*Laxmi* for *Laxmi*".

"Oh my Goodness! But my dear *Laxmi*, how did those women who are total strangers to you come to know that I got the money because of your wisdom?"

"Simple, my dear husband. They knew that it was not your wisdom because if you were intelligent, you would not have allowed them to take the vegetables in the first place without getting the money. Yet, when you could reach them the next day, they were sure that it was some other brain in the house behind solving the address riddles. The conclusion was obvious. It had to be the woman of the house. That is why they said, "*Laxmi* for *Laxmi*". Now does it clear the cobwebs in your mind, my dear dumb husband?"

The naive *Seth* stood there, dumbfounded!

[30] In Hindu mythology, *Laxmi* is the goddess of wealth.

GIRL WHO LOVED RIDDLES

THE barber Sarbatiya[31] lived in Lunawa. He had a sweet personality fully conforming to his name. He used to speak very sweetly and humbly. He could sugar coat the most bitter of messages and had mastered very well the art of saying the most disagreeable of things in the most pleasant manner. His listeners would be charmed. Sarbatiya's wife Meethabai[32] was equally charming. She would also keep the customers happy with her sweet talk.

Sarbatiya had a sixteen-year-old daughter. Her name was Hulasi. She liked to talk only in riddles. She was very quick witted and could invariably invent riddles anytime almost instantly.

Hulasi was not only intelligent but was beautiful as well. Sarbatiya wanted to get his daughter married in a rich family. However, the wealthy barber families looked for lavish dowry. Sarbatiya had no wealth to give such a generous dowry for his daughter. It had therefore become difficult for him to find a good match for Hulasi.

Gheesu was a well-to-do barber who lived in a nearby village. Sarbatiya had an eye on his handsome young son Sundar for his daughter's hand. However, Gheesu was a greedy man. He wanted a lavish dowry for his only son. This prevented the matrimonial alliance of Sundar and Hulasi.

One day Hulasi was alone in her house. She was playing with her glass balls. Sarbatiya and Meethabai had gone out. A stranger knocked at the door and asked, "Is Sarbatiyaji[33] home?"

"No, he is not. I am his daughter Hulasi." Hulasi said.

"Where are they gone?" The stranger asked.

Hulasi answered with great elegance and poise. "My mother has gone to make two from one and my father has gone to stop the evaporation of the sea. Please be seated for a while. They are expected to return soon."

The stranger said, "Daughter! I do not understand what you say. "Two from one" and "stopping evaporation of the sea", are beyond my comprehension."

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[31] *Sarbatiya* connotes someone with the qualities of *Sarbat,* which in Hindi means a sweet drink.

[32] *Meethabai* is a union of *Meetha* meaning sweet and *bai* that is a respectable form of address for female persons in Hindi.

[33] The suffix *ji* is added to the name as a mark of respect for the addressed person.

Hulasi kept her glass balls aside and said, "My mother has gone to the village head's mansion, to deliver[34] the baby of his expectant wife. After delivery, she will be able to give the baby to the expectant mother and come. This is what I meant when I said, "make two from one". My father has gone to the house of Pansaram, the drummer. The roof of the drummer's house had collapsed in the rains. He will come after laying a new roof of hay. That will stop the rainwater from entering the house. Rainwater is nothing but evaporation from the sea! I am sure you understand it now?"

The stranger was spell bound. 'This girl is very clever!' he thought to himself. He was silently appreciating Hulasi. He now said, "Tell Sarbatiyaji that Gheesu had paid a visit. I will leave now. Please close the door behind me."

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[34] Traditionally, barbers' wives would also be professional midwives.

Hulasi was quick-witted in her response. She said, "The son is getting cooked and father is burning. Please wait for a while. You may please leave only after having food."

The poor stranger was once again speechless. He said, "Son is getting cooked and father is burning? I do not understand. Why, my dear girl, are you making fun of me?"

Hulasi very courteously said, "You are like my father. Why would I make fun of you? Let me explain." Then pointing out towards the fireplace, she said, "*Kair*[35] berries are getting cooked for dinner. The firewood for cooking fire is from the burning of dry branches of the same *Kair* tree."

The stranger was highly impressed by her politeness and intelligence. He said, "Tell Sarbatiyaji that the matrimonial alliance of Gheesu's son Sundar with Hulasi is done."

Hulasi quickly understood the identity of the stranger and blushed. She ran inside the house. Hulasi had effortlessly accomplished the task that Sarbatiya had not been able to achieve for a long time.

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[35] In the desert in western Rajasthan, the vegetation is sparse. *Kair* is one of the thorny shrub-like trees that survive in the desert. The tree is very useful as its fruit in the form of berries are cooked to prepare dishes and the dry branches and trunk are used as firewood.

GREEDY FINDOJI

IN the pre-independence days, barber Findoji was popular in the entire Ratangarh city for his excellent workmanship. Nobody could excel him in the art of hairdressing. Findoji was the barber to the King of Ratangarh for past seven years. Now his son had inherited his role and served the King.

Findoji only attended to some rich and influential persons including prosperous merchants and moneylenders. Wealthy men also used to call only Findoji. His hairdressing and shaving had a silken touch. While shaving, he also used to jest with the customers. This would occasionally land him in trouble.

Findoji's in-laws lived in Bikaner. As a result, tales of his skill and proficiency had also traveled to Bikaner. Whenever he used to go to Bikaner, the rich and important people there would be eager to avail of his services.

One day, a young merchant of Bikaner, Tolaram came to Ratangarh for some business. Tolaram sent for Findoji for his haircut. Upon arrival, Findoji asked, "Sir! Which style do you want?"

The merchant said, "I am loosing my hair. Which style would you suggest for the receding hair?"

The barber answered in hushed tone, "The King had also faced the same problem with his hair. I advised him to have his head clean shaved once. Thereafter, the hair that grows after such a clean shave is dense. The King accepted my advice and when the new hair grew, it was indeed thick, black, shiny and curly. The King was extremely pleased and in appreciation he gifted me a tray full of gold coins"

Merchant Tolaram was impressed and readily agreed to get his head clean shaved. With utmost proficiency, Findoji started the merchant's haircut. With deft movements of the razor, he quickly shaved off all the hair on the merchant's head. When the haircut was over, the merchant's baldhead was shining. The barber looked at merchant's face and as was his wont, joked, "Wow! You look great, just like a *Jhara*.[36]"

This crude joke shocked Merchant Tolaram. He angrily asked: "God has given me fairly good looks. How do you compare my face with a *Jhara*??"

The irrepressible Findoji caught hold of the merchant's nose with one hand, pulled it hard and said, "This is how!" Then, going on in the same crude vein, he started tapping his fingers on the merchant's head as if he was playing musical notes with his fingers on an earthen pitcher. He was also producing a semblance of musical tunes and simultaneously singing, "*tan-tana-tana-tan*...."

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[36]A traditional shining brass water jug-like dispenser with a spout.

This vulgar joke of Findoji terribly upset Merchant Tolaram. He was seething with anger and felt like punching him. But he realized that the barber had served the King for seven years and had his ear. He could falsely poison the King's mind against him. Exercising discretion, he kept quiet. He had to wait for the right opportunity. Tolaram curbed his anger. Hiding his inner feelings, he even paid Findoji five rupees instead of the usual two.

Findoji was very happy to get the generous tip. He believed that the merchant was indeed pleased with his comparison of his baldhead with a *Jhara* very much. He therefore said, "Sir! Only a few people are intelligent and large-hearted enough to appreciate the high-level jokes that are my hallmark. I hope you will give me a chance to serve you again."

Merchant Tolaram returned to Bikaner. He narrated the whole story to his father merchant Chaganlal, and how he felt humiliated by the crude behaviour of the barber. Chaganlal too did not like the ill-mannered jesting of the barber with his son. He decided to wait for the right moment.

A few days later, merchant Tolaram had to go again to Ratangarh on a business trip. His father Chaganlal confidentially gave him some tips. Fully armed with advice from his father, Tolaram soon reached Ratangarh.

This time too he sent for Findoji to get his haircut. Findoji was very happy. Before beginning his work, he asked, "Sir! How do you want your haircut to be done?"

"Give me the best hair cut you can" the merchant said. "If it is good, I will please you."

Findoji was pleased when he heard the words "I will please you" from Tolaram. His scheming mind considered it a great opportunity. He made a mental plan to work it to his advantage. He said, "Sir! I know that you are a man of high rank and prestige. I am sure you will remember and keep you word. I will give you the best of my services. I am sure that when the occasion arises, you too will not go back on your word and keep your promise to "please me."

When the barber completed his job, the merchant gave him five silver rupee coins. However, far from being happy, he did not even acknowledge it. The merchant now offered him ten silver coins but the barber turned his face away. The merchant then took out twenty-five rupees but the barber again refused to accept it. The barber was adamant and refusing to be pleased. The merchant realized that the barber was trying to pin him down literally to his words, "I will please you". He was thinking of a way to get out of his tight spot.

The barber's behaviour frustrated the merchant. He said, "Dear! What is that will please you? If twenty-five rupees are inadequate for a haircut, you tell me what your expectation is?"

"How do I know?" chirped in the barber. "It is your job to please me. Do it howsoever you can. Sir, you are a big man and you are the one who gave me his word to please me."

The merchant was worried. He and his father had always honoured their commitments. They had never broken their word. How could he not honour his word now? He well knew that the barber was being unreasonable. Yet, just to keep his word he kept increasing his offer to pay fifty, then hundred, then two hundred, then four hundred, then five hundred and finally even as much as a thousand rupees. Even then, the barber refused to budge. In sheer desperation, the merchant even offered to pay him five thousand rupees, but still in vain.

Findoji still sat in a corner, feigning dissatisfaction. Merchant Tolaram said to him, "Dear barber, all my efforts to please you have failed. Now if you agree, I suggest that we meet my father at Bikaner. May be, he can find an equitable way to please you."

Again, feigning hurt, Findoji said curtly, "I do not care whether you take me to your father or to your mother or to someone else. But please, you have to find some way to please me."

Merchant Tolaram returned to Bikaner to meet his father Chaganlal. Findoji accompanied him. Tolaram was dejected and tired of Findoji's intransigent attitude. He narrated, in detail, the whole episode to his father. Chaganlal called Findoji and said, "Hey Findoji! If even five thousand rupees for a haircut is not enough to please you, can you let us have an idea of how we can please you?" When Findoji kept quiet,

Chaganlal said, "If you are not in a position to tell us, call your in-laws for help. Tomorrow we will talk again and find a way to please you."

The next day, in-laws of Findoji also came along. Chaganlal and Tolaram sat with their families. The neighbours and servants also joined in. They were curious to know how the merchant would keep his word and his reputation. In the presence of everyone, the senior merchant upped his offer and now offered ten thousand rupees to Findoji, if only he would be pleased. The merchant pulled out one hundred crisp new notes of hundred rupees each. However, Findoji still sat with a frown on his face. He said, "I am still not pleased. Do something to please me."

Merchant Chaganlal now came forward. He quickly took the money back, put it in the inner pocket of his coat and said aloud, "Findoji, come to me. I now have an idea to please you.

With bowed head, Findoji slowly walked to Chaganlal. The merchant said, "You have been really clever. Will marrying the princess of the King of Bikaner please you or adoption as a son of the King of Ratangarh please you? Which will please you more?"

Findoji was dumbfounded this time. He slowly raised his bowed head. He was intelligent enough to realize that things had gone too far and out of his hand now. He knew that the options proposed by the merchant had trapped him. In the first place, which King will take him as a son-in-law or adopt him as his son? If he refuses any of the options, the concerned King will take it as an insult. He was apprehensive that the merchant would present it as such to the affected King. Then who knows, the King may order his beheading. What was he to do now?

Findoji was a clever man. He realized that the advantage he so far had was fast slipping away from him. He said, "*Sethji*! I will rather accept the ten thousand rupees. That will please me."

Chaganlal knew that he had turned the tables on Findoji. He softly said, "Dear barber! That is all in the past. You turned down that option and that is now history. It can no longer be revived. The past is past, and beyond retrieval. We can now only talk of the present? What will please you more? Marrying the princess or being adopted as the son of the King?"

Findoji said sheepishly, "All the citizens are like children to their King. I am very glad to be citizen son to the King. I am happy. Indeed, I am very pleased. But..."

Chaganlal interjected sharply and said, "It is nice that we have finally been able to please you. Now that we are able to please you, we are also pleased. We have honoured our commitment."

Findoji was speechless at the turn of events. He could only regret and repent the loss of ten thousand rupees he had in his reach. Why did he get greedy? Now, he will have to live with his folly for his whole life.

CLEVER *BANIA*

ONE day God Indra was having his royal court. Vishnu, Laxmi, Saraswati, Daridra Devi, Bhairav, Kali mata etc., were all chatting. Goddess Kali said, "Lately, men on earth are becoming very smart. I just hope these human beings never fool us. Especially these *Baniyas*[37] are clever and have often made fool of many of our lesser gods and goddesses.

The other Gods and Goddesses did not quite appreciate the bitter truth bluntly stated by Kali *maa*[38]. Bhairav who was well known for his ill temper was the god most hurt. He snapped at Kali. "Kali! You are generalizing for all the Gods and Goddess. Tell us the name of at least one if you can. Which God has ever been befooled?"

Kali laughed. She said, "Why, Bhairav? Have you forgotten the incident when that buffalo calf was pulling you around the town?"

Bhairav could not instantly recall. He was angry and said, "Why don't you be specific instead of talking in riddles? You are only making fun of me."

Using her divine powers, Kali *maa* recalled the past in her mind. Kali *maa*'s face now had a special halo of satisfaction. She could see in her mind the full details of this incident in the past. Excited, she said, "Listen, Oh residents of heaven! Bhairav is asking for details! The tale is like this.

Once there was a merchant, a *baniya*. He had ample wealth and riches but no child. The *baniya* and his wife prayed to Bhairav. The *baniya* vowed that if he got a baby, he would offer a buffalo to Bhairav. Brother Bhairav was pleased and with his divine powers blessed the couple. Sure enough in the ninth month, a beautiful baby boy was born to the *baniya* couple. The *baniya* and his wife were very happy.

When their son became a month old, the *baniya's* wife reminded her husband about their vow to offer a buffalo in the temple of Bhairav. The *baniya* was a miser of the first order. He now wanted to somehow wriggle out of his vow and save the cost of a buffalo offering. He kept on postponing the redemption of his vow.

The *baniya's* son was soon a year old toddler. On his birthday, the wife again reminded him. He did not have the courage to disown openly his vow but his scheming mind had been thinking to find some way to avoid the expense. The *baniya* now made a lame excuse. "Everyday people sacrificed so many buffaloes at Bhairav's feet. Did Bhairav ever come down to taste even a single morsel from those offerings? No." The *baniya* also did not want to incur the sin of killing a buffalo as an offering?

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[37] Persons belonging to the trading class.

[38] Literally means mother. The expression is also used as a suffix to address elderly women.

The *baniya's* wife kept nagging him. Finally tired of her pestering, the *baniya* agreed to fulfill his pledge. The clever *baniya* brought a milch buffalo and its male calf. Next day, he along with his wife and the toddler son took the buffalo and the calf to Bhairav's temple. There was a stone idol of Bhairav in the temple. The *baniya's* family prayed at Bhairav's feet and made traditional flower, vermilion powder and incense offerings. The *baniya* however did not want to commit the sin of killing an animal. He therefore tied the rope of the calf to Bhairav's stone idol and with closed eyes prayed, "Lord, please accept my offering of the buffalo calf. I cannot kill the animal nor did I promise that to you. Please do accept it as it is."

Having thus fulfilled his vow, the *baniya* started walking homeward with his family. He also had the mother buffalo in tow. Seeing its mother leaving, the calf started bleating.

It tugged very hard at the rope tying it the Bhairav idol and jumped around in an effort to free itself. In spite of all its efforts, the calf was not able to snap the strong rope but its effort was not altogether wasted. With all its tugging, it was able to pull out the stone idol itself from its foundation. It now started running towards its mother with the stone idol still tied to it. It was an unusual sight of the calf running and dragging with it the idol of Bhairav tied to it with the rope. The *baniya* looked back and saw the plight of the hapless Bhairav idol. He quickly ran back and untied the rope from the stone idol. He lifted the idol and respectfully carried it and installed it again at its original place. Bhairav was relieved.

Bhairav could now recall the episode but he was annoyed at the way Kali was making fun of him. He said, "Kali! You are bragging because you have never blessed any *baniya* with a son. I challenge you. Try giving some *baniya* a son and watch. Forget about the offering of a buffalo. I will cease calling myself Bhairav if you are able to extract the offering of even a rupee from a *baniya*."

When Laxmi and her sister Daridra Devi heard this tale, they had a hearty laugh at the discomfiture of brother Bhairav. Kali *maa* then sarcastically told them, "Why are you laughing? The *baniyas* have not spared you too. These *baniyas* have made a fool of you two as well."

Laxmi and Daridra Devi were not amused. Kali maa smiled and said, "Both of you sisters were fooled by the flattery of that *baniya*. What a pity? You were totally fooled and you do not even remember it."

"How?" asked the puzzled Laxmi and Daridra. "Let me explain." said Kali *maa* and then narrated the incident that happened at the time of last Diwali.

That day Laxmi and Daridra Devi had both gone down from their heavenly abode to earth to enjoy Diwali, the festival of lights. They were dressed gorgeously. They were looking stunningly beautiful and attractive. Her own beauty fascinated Laxmi. Daridra Devi too was proud of her own loveliness. The sisters became jealous of each other. They were arguing, who is the more beautiful of them.

Who should decide was the argument? Finally, they agreed that they would ask the first man they meet on earth to judge their comparative beauty. Luckily, just then they met a *baniya* who was returning from the temple. Laxmi and Daridra Devi introduced themselves and asked him who in his judgment was the more beautiful of them.

The *baniya* was an intelligent man. He did not want to displease any of the two. Respectfully he said, "Both of you are extremely pretty. I invite you to my house. When you walk, I will have an opportunity to watch your steps and the delicacy and grace of the movements. That will help me come to a final judgment. Please come with me to my house."

The *baniya* brought them to his grand *haveli*. They reached the gate of the *haveli*. He first addressed Laxmi and said, "Wow! Your walk is extremely graceful like a young female swan gliding in water. It matches your beauty. Please oblige me by stepping inside my house. You sit in the locker room while I go out to watch Daridra Devi's walk."

The *baniya* now went to Daridra Devi and with extra humility and great respect said, "Beautiful Goddess! Your glittering looks are amazing. How can I ever describe in words your overall beauty, from head to toe? Now could you please turn around and walk, while I watch."

Pleased with such flattering appreciation of her beauty, Daridra Devi turned around and walked with a swagger. Fully taken in by the adulation, she walked away from the main door. The *baniya* kept lavishing praise on her and Daridra Devi kept on walking away from the house. Fully intoxicated by the thoughts of her beauty, she kept walking and going farther and farther from the *baniya's haveli*.

The *baniya* was very happy within himself. He mused, "Laxmi! You look good entering my house and Daridra Devi looks good walking away from my house."[39] He was cleverly thinking of his next move. The merchant now returned to the safe deposit and locker room. Bowing with great respect, he said, "My revered goddess Laxmi! Your beauty and looks are incomparable. When I mentioned this to Daridra Devi she got upset and walked away."

Laxmi was extremely pleased to hear it. Since then it is the belief that Laxmi is happy to reside in a *baniya's haveli* and Daridra Devi would never come back to a *baniya's* home.

Kali *maa* finished the story and turned to Laxmi and Daridra Devi. "Now tell me, my dears, who is cleverer? The *baniya* or you?"

Laxmi and Daridra Devi were now able to vividly recall the incident and felt cheated. Until then they had not understood how the clever *baniya* had manipulated their ego and vanity!

[39] The reason for the *baniya's* happiness was that in Hindu mythology, Goddess Laxmi epitomizes wealth while Daridra Devi represents poverty.

HALDI[40] AND SONTH[41]

WEAVER Maganlal lived in the city of Barmer. Spinning wool and weaving blankets was his family tradition. Maganlal was a very intelligent and proficient weaver. In a short time, he earned a lot of money and fame from his business of wool and woolens.

Still there was a big void in the prosperous household of Maganlal. The couple was childless. He and his wife used to feel extremely dejected. As a last resort, they prayed at the famous temple of Ramdeo Baba in the village of Ramdeora.[42] They made a solemn vow that if the Baba granted their wish; they would make an offering at his temple. Soon, their prayers were answered and the couple were blessed with twin daughters.

Maganlal and his wife were overjoyed with happiness to have two beautiful daughters after a wait of so many years. In his caste, there was no dowry system. The girl child was not frowned upon and was as much welcome as a boy child. Girls were not a burden for the parents and their marriages would be performed with lot of fervour, zest and zeal. The parents did not have to worry about the future of their daughters. Maganlal and his wife were extremely fond of their daughters.

In those days, it was the practice for the grand parents to choose the names for their grand children. Maganlal's parents were very orthodox. They were superstitious and believed that the evil eye would cast its wicked influence on beautiful children with attractive names. They were therefore against keeping attractive names for beautiful and dearly loved children. The grandfather and grandmother accordingly decided to name their grand daughters with unattractive names. They named the girls as Haldi and Sonth.

Both the sisters were beautiful. The similarity however ended there. Even though they were twins, they had totally divergent natures. Haldi had a sweet nature and was polite and hardworking. She was always helpful to all and sundry. She won the hearts of all by her sincere action and sweet talk. All the girls in the village were friendly with her. Everyone in the village liked Haldi.

Sonth, on the other hand, was generally irritable, hot-tempered and lazy. She was discourteous to her friends and even to elders. Every now and then, she would pick up a quarrel and cry. She would disrupt the game if she found herself on the losing side. She never helped anyone. No one liked her company and she had no friends. After all, who would like to befriend such an ill-tempered and unreasonable person? People

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[40] Turmeric

[41] Dried Ginger

[42] Near the town of Pokharan.

would often wonder at the stark contrast between the sisters. "How different are the twins?" was the common comment.

Years went by. Haldi and Sonth were now teenagers.

One day, Haldi expressed a desire to visit her maternal grandparents. Her parents were initially reluctant but considering her keenness finally relented. For the journey, her parents packed with her the traditional Rajasthani sweet preparation of *choorma*[43] and provided a *badla*[44] for supply of cool drinking water during the journey. Haldi also took some clothes and a box of toys as gifts for her cousins. As Haldi embarked on

[43] It is cooked sweet preparation made from wheat flour, jaggery (*gur*) and ghee.

[44] It is a traditional water container with a zinc shell covered with cloth covering. Evaporation from the moistened cloth covering allows the water inside the container to remain cool even in hot weather.

her journey, her friends in the village were unhappy at the thought of missing her company during her absence. The elders were also sad. Almost the whole village came out to bid her a tearful farewell.

After walking for a while, Haldi was tired and sat down near a narrow road. She heard a hissing sound near her. She looked around and was horrified at what she saw. A dust storm of the previous night had knocked down an old tree and a black cobra, pinned down under the fallen tree, was hissing. Haldi was scared but mustered enough courage to push the old tree to one side. That freed the snake. The snake quickly slid away into the bushes near by.

Walking some more distance, Haldi felt hungry. She sat down beneath a tree. She had just begun eating *choorma* when she spotted a wild cat ready to pounce on a pack of mother mouse and its litter of seven babies that were playfully jumping around on dry leaves. Haldi threw a pebble at the cat to drive it away. The mouse and its babies quickly ran into the safety of their earth burrow. Haldi put some *choorma* at the opening of the burrow and resumed her journey.

The mid-day sun had become very hot. Haldi was feeling very thirsty. She sat beside a dense '*bor*'[45] tree and took out water in a glass from her *badla*. A mix of *bors* and thorny twigs of the tree were littered below the *bor* tree. As she was drinking water, Haldi accidentally dropped her glass of water and it rolled down the slope to land in the midst of the thorny twigs. While trying to retrieve her glass, Haldi noticed a small pup entangled in thorny twigs. It was writhing in pain. The ever compassionate Haldi gently pulled it out. She also fed it with some *choorma* and water. When she continued her journey, the little pup also followed her.

The setting sun was turning yellow and crimson. Haldi was close to her maternal grandparents' house. The pup following her suddenly started barking. Haldi looked around but could see nothing unusual. The pup moved towards a sand-hill and continued barking. Haldi followed the pup and soon noticed a hapless camel lying on the other side of the sand-hill. Its mouth was open and its tongue had come out as if it was gasping for breath. It was thirsty and emaciated. Sensing that the animal was weak and may be close to its death, vultures were hovering above in the sky above the sand-hill.

Haldi's waving of arms and the pup's barking drove away the vultures. Seeing that the camel was very thirsty she took out water from her *badla*. In Barmer and other districts of western Rajasthan, water is very scarce because of recurring draughts and ghee is often cheaper than water. It had not rained in that region for the last twelve years and the water scarcity was extremely acute. People had to trudge miles to get drinking water from the few scattered deep wells. Water in her *badla* was thus very precious but the plight of the camel moved her. She thought no more and poured the water from her *badla* into the open parched mouth of the camel. Slowly, she emptied the *badla* into the camel's mouth. It took great effort for the camel to even move its

[45] It is a thorny shrub-like tree that grows well in the dry and hot desert climate. Its fruit of sweet berries called *bor* are popular in western Rajasthan.

tongue to swallow the softly dropping water. However, water acted like elixir for the camel. Haldi could almost feel the grateful look in the camel's eyes. The camel gained some strength and could now sit up and move its neck and tail around to scare the vultures away.

Haldi reached her maternal grandfather's house. The pup also followed her. Her maternal grandparents, uncles and aunts were all very happy to see and meet her. Haldi opened her bags and gave sweets to the children. She also distributed the gifts that she had brought. Everyone appreciated her thoughtfulness and sincerely welcomed her.

Haldi's sweet and helping nature soon won her the hearts of all the members of the family. In a short time, she became the darling of the neighbourhood and the entire village. She made many new friends. A fortnight quickly passed and Haldi was feeling homesick. She expressed her desire to return home. However, no one there wanted her to go. Everyone had taken a liking to her and her sweet nature. She was persuaded to stay for some more time. After another fortnight, when she repeated her request they reluctantly agreed to let her go back. Her grandparents gifted her lots of dresses. Her grandmother even made a quilt coat for the pup. Her uncles and aunts made sweets for her. The villagers gifted her a *chopar*[46], some *kauriyan*[47], some *dhalu-peelu*[48] and some *khejri ke khokhey*[49]. Haldi's friends made *cheed*[50] armlets and *timaniya*[51] for her. With a heavy heart, the villagers saw her off. Carrying many gifts, Haldi left the village and started her homeward journey. The pup was now her constant companion.

When Haldi reached the sand-hill, the camel came running. It sat down in the middle of the road virtually blocking her path. It lowered its hump and started motioning its long neck and head as if it was expressing its gratitude and saying, "Dear Haldi! How will you carry so much weight all by yourself? Come and be seated on my back. I will quickly and comfortably carry you to your home in Barmer." It greatly touched Haldi. She could very well understand the gestures and gratitude of the mute animal. It was a long journey and she was happy to climb on the camel back with the pup and her bags. The camel was soon galloping along and a swaying Haldi tightly held to her seat on the camel back.

After traveling some distance, Haldi stopped. She climbed down from the camel's back to drink water. She stretched in the shade of the tree to rest her aching limbs and was just about to take out her *badla* when the big mouse appeared as if from nowhere. The baby mice also followed. Each was holding a gold coin between its teeth. The mother mouse and its babies swiftly dropped the gold coins near Haldi and ran off. This unusual gesture of gratitude on the part of these simple creatures greatly moved Haldi. She safely put the coins in her bag.

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[46] a Ludo-like indoor game played with dice.

[47] Generally uniform sea shells used as dice in the game of *chopar*.

[48] A berry-like fruit that grows on local desert shrubs.

[49] Flat, long sweet dry beans of a thorny desert tree called *khejri*.

[50] Small glass beads.

[51] A traditional piece of wide decorative necklace typically worn by women in western Rajasthan

She climbed again on the camel back and after traveling some more distance, she noticed a hooded black cobra comfortably sitting in the middle of the road and blocking her path. The camel hesitated and the pup barked but Haldi was not scared. She got down and saw the cobra dropping seven different kinds of precious gems from its mouth near her. The snake then quietly slid away. Haldi was once again greatly moved. She was overwhelmed by the manner in which each of the creatures, the pup, the camel, the mice and the snake, that are normally shunned or feared by human beings, was sincerely showing its gratitude. She kept the seven precious gems in her bag and continued her journey.

They had now reached Barmer. Soon, they reached her doorstep. Haldi climbed down from the camel back. The pup followed. Her grandfather, grandmother, father and mother were all happy. They welcomed her back with great affection. Her friends were also excited and came running to embrace her. Haldi showed them the gifts of the clothes, jewellery, toys etc. She gave the gold coins and gems to her mother, *chopar* to her father and clothes and jewellery to her sister. She shared sweets with her friends and distributed *dhalu-peelu* and *khokhey* amongst the villagers. Everybody was pleased to receive the gifts as her token of love. However, Sonth was seething with anger and jealousy at the affection and praise Haldi was receiving from every one. She flew into a rage and threw away Sonth's gifts of clothes and jewelery for her. She was resentful at knowing that her maternal grandparents had presented so many gifts to Haldi. She also felt greedy and had an inner urge to get even better gifts. In a huff, she announced her intention to leave immediately for the home of her maternal grandparents. She also dared Haldi saying, "You just watch. If I do not get many more gifts than you, then I'll stop calling myself Sonth." Saying this, she packed a few things and was ready to leave the house.

Her mother said, "Darling! Take these *suaa-chidiya*[52] as gifts for the children at your maternal parents' home. I have myself made these from cloth cuttings. Also, take some *choorma* and sweets for everyone there. You should not go empty handed." Sonth was scornful and curtly said, "We go to our maternal parents' house to get gifts, not to give gifts? Isn't it stupid?" Hurriedly, Sonth left. There was no one around to see her off or say goodbye.

Total peace reigned for a couple of days and there were no acrimonious quarrels or angry interruptions of games. Friends and acquaintances did not take long to discover that Sonth was not around and had left for her maternal parents' home. They felt quite relieved and looked forward to some weeks of peaceful time. The more experienced older people however said, "That girl is querulous and abrasive like a red chilly. She cannot stay peacefully with any one. You just watch. She will soon be back like a bad coin." The subsequent events fully justified their apprehension.

On her way to her maternal grand parents' home, just outside her village Sonth saw a doe injured by an arrow. Its pleading eyes looked at Sonth for help. But Sonth did not

[52]Colourful home-made toy parrots sewn from small cloth remnants.

care to give it a second look and kept walking. After walking some distance, she came to a *dhani*[53]. An aged and ailing sweet seller, unable to get up was lying on a cot. His oven was cold and all his cooking pots and pans were idle, lying upturned. Seeing Sonth, the sick sweet seller hoped for some help and said, "Dear girl! My son has gone to till the soil on the farm. Can you please hand me some water and *rabri*[54] from inside my hut." Sonth curtly responded, "I am not a servant of your father. If you like to be served while lying comfortably sprawled on your cot you better hire some servants for yourself!" Without caring for the hungry, old and ailing sweet seller, she just walked away.

On her way ahead was a huge *peepal* tree. A cow was sitting under the tree. It had a wound on its back. The open wound attracted flies. Seeing the open wound, eagles and crows were also hovering above. Sonth had no pity on the wounded animal. Her face grimaced in disgust and she walked away from it.

She now reached a small village. People there had gone off to work in the farms. A lonely old woman was sitting on a cot. She had a comb in her hand. Scattered around her were beautiful Barmer blankets[55] of different kinds. She had herself woven these blankets from sheep wool. She said, "My dear daughter! I have lice in my hair. They are extremely troublesome and I have lot of itching because of them. I have this comb made of buffalo horn. Can you please help me comb the lice out. God will bless..."

Sonth cut her short and said, "Me, and take out your lice? I do not even comb my own hair. My mother combs them for me and makes my tresses. You oldie! You expect me to soil my fingers in your lice-laden hair?"

Stomping her feet, Sonth walked off. All along, she had been very insensitive to the suffering whether it was an injured deer or a sick cow or an aged sweet seller or an old weaver. Sonth finally reached the home of her maternal grandparents.

Her grand parents greeted her and said, "Come dear Sonth! How are your parents and grandparents?"

Sonth retorted, "Why do you have to ask me? If you have a desire to know about their well being, you ought to stir out of your house." Sonth was similarly rude and abrasive in her interaction with her uncles and aunts. She displayed neither respect for elders nor love for those younger to her. Instead of helping others, she would just boss around and order every one around.

She used to pick up quarrels with the outsiders also whenever she used to step out of the house. Her maternal grandparents were sick of receiving complaints about her behaviour.

One day, she crossed all limits. While playing, she beat the village *zamindar's*[56] daughter. The *zamindar* immediately complained to her grandparents. Her grandfather

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[53] A small cluster of houses, generally smaller than a village.

[54] A local sweet made from simmer-boiled thickened milk, sprinkled with saffron, grated pistachios and almonds and some other dry fruits.

[55] These are rough but very warm colourful blankets, locally woven from sheep wool.

[56] One who has traditionally owned land and has some powers to collect land revenue.

was deeply anguished and felt ashamed. In a show of disapproval and disgust, that day no one spoke to her. Sonth got annoyed and in a fit of anger announced, "I am leaving right away..."

Sonth had imagined that everyone will plead with her to stay on for some more time but no one bothered to stop her. Everybody wanted to see her back. She was caught in her own trap and now had no alternative but to leave. No one gave her any gifts of clothes or jewellery or sweets. Her grand parents did not even offer to pack a lunch for her. Sonth walked out of the house in a huff and was soon out of the village.

She had walked a little distance when she saw the same old woman weaving her blankets. There were bundles of different kinds of beautiful blankets stacked all around her. She had also displayed some *angarkhies*[57] prepared by her. No one had given Sonth any gifts. She felt the need to get some of these articles. Now making an effort to be extra sweet, she addressed the woman, "Dear old lady! Please give me one blanket and an *angarkhi*?"

It was now the turn of the old woman to be sarcastic. "You had heaped scorn at me and my hair and were loathe to touch my 'dirty' head. I spend a lot of effort in making these blankets. Why should I give them to you? Are you not ashamed to ask these for free? Get lost, girl!"

Rebuffed, thirsty and hungry, Sonth kept walking. After walking some distance, she saw a cow. It was feeding its calf. Sonth was feeling very thirsty and hungry. She was trying to get near the udders of the cow and get some milk but the cow turned around and hit her wildly with its horns. Sonth was lifted up on the horns. The toss up was so strong that she somersaulted many times and fell quite some distance away.

Sonth was profusely sweating under the hot sun. She decided to rest for a while in the shade of a tree. In the small breeze under the tree, she could smell some sweet aroma at a distance. Sonth proceeded in the direction of the inviting aroma. She saw the sweet seller was making *ghevar, feeni, imarati, tavapuri*[58] *etc*. Her appetite was aroused with the mouth-watering aroma of these special sweets. She said, "Baba[59]! Please give me some sweets." The sweet-seller had not forgotten her acerbic remarks while she was going to her maternal parents. He replied, "Sonth *bai*![60] You felt below your dignity to give water to a sick man!" and raising his voice said sarcastically, "Now, would your teeth not hurt while eating my sweets? Go get lost!" Then musing to himself, he said, "How cheeky! She now wants to eat my hot and fresh sweets!"

Extremely tired, hungry and thirsty, Sonth resumed her journey. Her home village was near by. Suddenly she saw a doe and its fawns. She thought to herself, "It would be nice if I had one of these fawns as my pet. I could play with a fawn even when

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[57] A coat-like upper wear for men.

[58] Different kinds of Rajasthani sweet specialities.

[59] A form of respectful address for elderly persons.

[60] *Bai* is used as a suffix to the name to respectfully address girls and women.

my friends quarrel with me." She moved forward to pick up one delicate fawn but the doe and the fawns all raced away and out of her reach. All that she got was the dust blown into her eyes by the hooves of the deer speeding away from her!

Returning home, she ran to a secluded place on the third floor roof of the house. Sitting in a corner under the thatched roof, she started crying. She felt humiliated and did not want to talk to anyone. She imagined that her friends were adding insult to injury when they asked for sweets. She abused them. Sonth cried for a long time. The good-natured Haldi tried affectionately to console her, but Sonth was her usual rude self. She said, "You are the source of all my misery. I cannot live in peace until you live!"

It is the general belief that ever since, Haldi (turmeric) and Sonth (ginger) continue to have contrasting attributes.

PRICE OF CUNNING

ZAMINDAR Bhairon Singh lived in the city of Sanganer. He had a lot of land. The farming was very profitable Along with farming, he also had a flourishing business of dyeing and printing. However, Bhairon Singh picked up the bad habit of excessive drinking. He would be drunk the whole day. Because of his addiction to drinking, he was no longer able to devote enough attention and time to his business. His farm was soon losing money. His other business had also to be closed after suffering serious setbacks and losses. Eventually, he lost all his money, and had to mortgage even the family jewellery and the ancestral *haveli*.

One day Bhairon Singh desperately needed five hundred rupees. But how was he to raise this loan? He had no more assets to mortgage. Bhairon Singh soon mentally worked out a plan. He took out his sword, wore it with a traditional leather belt on his waist and headed to the moneylender, Mukanchand. The same moneylender had always lent him money.

Bhairon Singh asked the moneylender for a loan of five hundred rupees. Mukanchand replied, "Sir! You have already mortgaged your farms, jewellery and *haveli*. What do you propose to pledge this time?"

Bhairon Singh replied, "*Sethji*! I do not have anything more to mortgage now. But I have to meet an urgent demand and require five hundred rupees."

Mukanchand never antagonized even his worst defaulting client. After all, he made most profits from such clients only. When such clients could not muster resources to repay their loans and the accrued interest, the ownership of the whole mortgaged asset worth much more than the outstanding amount passed on to the moneylender. In his usual manner, he was extra sweet and said, "Sir, It is your own shop. However, I have business policy. You have to pledge something. I leave it to you."

Bhairon Singh said, "*Sethji*! I have nothing else but this invaluable ancestral sword that I have inherited. It is priceless. I would not have given it to anyone even for a lakh of rupees. But today I am helpless. I shall be parting with this sword for the first time. You please accept it as a guarantee."

Mukanchand was a clever man. He said, "I know how to value property, gold and silver ornaments and precious stones. However, what does a mere moneylender like me understand about the value of an item like a sword? Only a Rajput warrior like you can estimate its value. For me a sword is a mere piece of iron!"

Bhairon Singh was short-tempered and often got angry over petty matters. Had it been any other day he would have argued and quarreled with Mukanchand. But that day,

unlike himself, he controlled his temper and maintained his calm. He was a shrewd man when not under the influence of liquour. He wanted to take advantage of Mukanchand's ignorance. He knew that even though the sword had sentimental value for the family, its intrinsic value was no more than the scrap value of a few kg of iron worth about twenty rupees. Yet he wanted to take five hundred rupees by somehow befooling Mukanchand. He thought to himself, "Once I exchange this sword worth twenty rupees for five hundred rupees, I will never take it back from the moneylender." Bhairon Singh mentally convinced himself that he was not doing anything wrong or unethical because Mukanchand had earlier made immense profits from him. He therefore did not feel guilty in extracting at least five hundred rupees from the moneylender.

Bhairon Singh confidently replied, "A sword is the ultimate honour of a Rajput. You have lent money for more ordinary things such as land and gems. You can well trust the self-esteem of a Rajput. This hereditary sword is usually the decoration of my waist. Now by force of circumstances, I have to mortgage it. If per chance I die before paying back your money, it will be very easy for you to realize at least a thousand rupees for this sword."

Mukanchand recalled that in the past the *zamindar* had always kept his word and had made timely payments. He reckoned that there was no harm in trusting him in this case. He therefore agreed to lend the five hundred rupees to him.

Giving five hundred rupees, Mukanchand said, "Please pay back the money as soon as possible. I have a family and I don't feel comfortable to keep a sword in my house."

Bhairon Singh said, "You need not worry about that *Sethji*. Whether or not I take my property or *haveli* back, I will definitely retrieve my sword. After all, my honour and pride are involved. Please keep it safely". He then safely tucked the five hundred rupees into the inner pocket of his coat.

Bhairon Singh was pleased that his plan had worked and happily went off. He had no intention to ever retrieve the worthless sword.

Two years passed. Not only did Bhairon Singh not return the money but he even stopped passing that locality or Mukanchand's shop. The moneylender realized that it was abnormal for Bhairon Singh not to pay in time. He had an intuition that there was something unusual. However, Mukanchand was smart and did not easily accept defeat. He was not used to giving up so easily. He resolved to himself that he would surely avenge the craftiness of Bhairon Singh. Deviousness had to be met with deviousness and dirt with dirt! Mukanchand waited for an appropriate opportunity.

Bhairon Singh had always patronized Jogi, a one-eyed barber. Jogi was a great source of all the news of the village. His witty narration made even simple stories spicy and Bhairon Singh loved hearing them. Jogi also used to serve Mukanchand, the moneylender. Mukanchand thought of a plan to use Jogi as a pawn in his efforts to avenge *zamindar* Bhairon Singh.

On a pleasant Friday morning, Jogi was at Mukanchand's house for his haircut. During his haircut, he asked the barber, "Jogi! Since when have you been serving me as a barber?"

"For over two decades, *Sethji*", chirped Jogi. "In fact, this is the twenty fifth year. I was the one who had carried out your *mundan*[61]. I was fifteen then. I am serving you since then."

Sethji said, "Jogi. You are like a member of our family. I wish to confide in you. You know, I am doing business for over twenty years now but never did I commit such a mistake." Having said so, the *Sethji* made a long face. He then took a deep breath and sighed.

Jogi was surprised. He asked, "What mistake, *Sethji*? You and mistakes just don't go together!"

Mukanchand put on a miserable look. He then pulled the barber towards him and whispered in his ear, as if in great confidence, that he was worried because he had lost the *zamindar's* sword. He further added that it was not the five hundred rupees that was troubling him. He was more worried by the fact that the sword represented the pride of the family of the *zamindar*. How will he face the *zamindar* if he came

[61] Among Hindus, it is a religious ceremony of tonsure of young boys.

asking for his sword? Trying to ensure that Jogi fully believed his story, Mukanchand once again stressed that he regarded him as a family member and that is why he was confiding in him. Mukanchand went on, "I would continue my search for the sword, but in case the sword cannot be traced I would look to you to come up with some advice. Will you..."

Jogi was taken in by Mukanchand's flattery. He said, "I will definitely help you."

After a while, a wicked thought came to Jogi's mind. He perceived *Sethji's* secret as a golden opportunity. He did not wish to waste even a minute in implementing the nefarious plan that had built up in his evil mind. He was impatient and he did not even wash his hands after finishing Mukanchand's haircut. He headed straight to the *zamindar's haveli.*

Zamindar Bhairon Singh was busy in his *navratri*[62] prayers. Jogi the barber was getting impatient to share the *Sethji's* secret with Bhairon Singh. He was so excited that he interrupted the *zamindar* without waiting for him to finish his prayers and said, "My lord! I have seen you in your finer days and now I am seeing you in your troubled times as well. Now, by the grace of our goddess, I am privy to a secret of that shylock *Seth.* I think it is an excellent opportunity for you. ..."

The *zamindar* could not make head or tail of Jogi's talk. In a full display of his ill temper, he yelled at him, "Speak up. You son of a barber! Do not talk to me in riddles."

Spicing up the story, the barber said, "My lord, Mukanchand has lost the precious inheritance of your ancestors, the sword. Now if you so desire, you could demand a fancy price for your sword from the *Seth.* This is a godsend for you to extract some money from him."

When the implication of Jogi's revelation sank in, the *zamindar* was overjoyed. Twirling his moustache in celebration, he said, "You have brought wonderful news. Just watch, how I play my cards. Now is indeed my chance to recover all the money that this shylock *Seth* and his family have usuriously extracted from our family for generations. If I do not succeed even now, I will never ever lift a sword again."

Noticing that the *zamindar* was already euphoric, Jogi his favourite barber said, "Sir! Please don't forget to reward me also at the appropriate time. It is not always that one is privy to such vital and secret information." Bhairon Singh said, "Of course, of course!"

The otherwise despondent Bhairon Singh was now jubilant with a new-found enthusiasm. He managed to raise a short-term loan of six hundred rupees and headed straight for Mukanchand's shop. He also dusted the empty leather case of the sword and wore it as a waistband.

Bhairon Singh wasted no time. He said to Mukanchand, "*Sethji*, I was busy with other things. I had almost forgotten that my sword is with you. I was reminded of the sword only when I started the *navratri* prayers of goddess Durga. I have interrupted my prayers and rushed to you to collect the sword. Please take your money with interest

[62] A Hindu period of nine days of prayers and worship of goddess Durga.

and return my sword. I will be able to resume my prayers only after having my sword on my waist."

Mukanchand knew that his plan was working and the *zamindar* had taken the bait. Pretending great sadness, he said, "*Zamindarji!* Something terrible has happened. The sword is lost. My servants have searched the whole *haveli*, but cannot find it. Now I am at your mercy."

Bhairon Singh was just waiting to hear this. He said angrily, "What? The sword is lost! That is my family heritage and you know it is priceless. It is impossible to replace it. At any cost, you have to find and get me my sword."

Mukanchand said, "You are an intelligent man, Sir. Think, what good is a sword for me? It is nothing more than a piece of iron to me. I had hidden it away from my children. Now I do not know who has stolen it or where has it disappeared?"

Raising his voice, Bhairon Singh now thundered, "I had already warned you that the sword was an invaluable family possession and represented our family honour and that you should keep it safely. How could you be so careless?" He then took out the pouch, pulled out the cash and in a dramatic flourish threw it on the floor and roared, "Here's your money- rupees five hundred towards principal and another hundred for interest! I want my sword this very moment."

Mukanchand kept up his pretence. He pleadingly said, "*Zamindarji*! Please do not throw and dishonour *Laxmi* like this." He slowly collected the money scattered on the floor. He then proceeded towards his house, saying, "I had asked my servants to again look for the sword. Now let me look for it myself. I cannot afford annoying people like you if I have to run my business. I will therefore search once again." Bhairon Singh waited expectantly.

After whiling away some time chatting with his wife, Mukanchand went in his locker room. He had the sword safely stored there on a rack. He picked the sword and carried it to the shop. To the waiting *zamindar* he announced with great flourish, "Oh great swordsman and warrior! Here is your sword. I had kept it in a safe corner inside the locker room but had forgotten about it and my servants could not find it. However, we are mighty lucky. God has saved me." Then extending the sword towards the *zamindar*, Mukanchand said, "It's yours, is it not?"

Bhairon Singh was bewildered by the turn of events. He never expected to see the sword. He could recognize it. He could not disown it as his family name was engraved on its handle. It was his. He did not know what to do. The *seth* had turned the tables on him. He had himself fallen into the trap he had laid for the moneylender. He knew that Mukanchand had outsmarted him. He could do nothing now.

Mukanchand said, "*Zamindarji*! Now you can worship without any hindrance. And, please keep the sword carefully. You will need it every *navratri*." Bhairon Singh did not miss the sarcasm.

Listlessly he put the sword in its waistband case and turned away. Downcast, the *zamindar* was reflecting. "In the end, craftiness always boomerangs. I tried to be clever but had to pay the price of my cunning."

The *zamindar* now had an immediate problem on hand. How would he pay back the short-term loan of six hundred rupees?

THE THUGS OF BIRAMI

BIRAMI is a village near the city of Jodhpur. Here many families of thugs live. These thugs would don different attires at different times to rob the travelers. The thugs were proficient in many kinds of arts. They knew to act like trapeze dancers, mimic the snake and mole fight and were proficient in other forms of dancing and singing. Some time they would set up temporary roadside restaurants and at some other time, they would open *Piaos*[63] . These thugs would then trap the unfortunate hungry and thirsty travelers in deserted jungles as their victims.

The thugs owned fast-running camels. These were their main means of mobility in the desert areas in which they operated. The thugs would take great care of their fast camels. In winters, they fed the camels with canisters of ghee made from cow's milk to make them strong and fast. After duping people and robbing them of their belongings, the thugs would quickly disappear from the site of crime on these fast camels.

Various interesting customs were prevalent in this tribe of thugs. In these families, the adolescent unmarried girls of the family performed the main job of hoodwinking travelers and robbing them. Their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters-in-law would be their accomplices in the background to make all the necessary preparations. Generally, the fathers drawing on their experience would invent new methods to rob travelers and the girls would implement them. Brothers would provide protection to their sisters and the sister-in-laws would take care of the households.

Among the thug daughters of Birami village, Harjotbai was the craftiest. Young and beautiful, she was the eldest daughter of thug Bhoorji. Harjot dressed differently at different times to rob unwary travelers. She had deceived several smart people. Bhoorji was also clever and frequently shifted his base from one village to another. Until then, they had gotten away easily after cheating people.

One day, Narain Singh was going through the jungle on his black horse. Narain Singh was the son of a local *zamindar*. It was a very honest and hardworking family. He had received news from his maternal grandfather's house about the illness of his mother and was going to the nearby village to see her. In the scorching desert heat, drinking water is indispensable. However, it is a scarce commodity in that area. Water ponds are rare and deep water wells are far and few. Travelers have to therefore carry their own stocks in suitable portable bags, bottles etc. Narain Singh too did not forget to pack his *badla*.[64] It was a very hot day. The midday sun and burning sand were

[63] Kiosks for cold drinking water

[64] It is a traditional water container with a zinc shell covered with cloth covering. Evaporation from the moistened cloth covering allows the water inside the container to remain cool even in hot weather.

making his journey extremely tiring and exhausting. Suddenly, his horse was startled on hearing some strange sounds of wild animals from the nearby jungle. It stopped suddenly. It was neighing furiously and stood erect on its two hind legs. Narain Singh was jolted in his seat. With the severe jolt, the cap of his water *badla* flew off. All his precious stock of drinking water spilled out of the open bag.

Narain Singh was already feeling extremely thirsty and had now to look out for water. His horse was also thirsty and froth was coming out of its mouth. Looking around, Narain Singh saw at some distance a shed with thatched roof with some large water-filled traditional earthen pitchers. When he went nearer, he was startled to see what he saw. Water was sprinkled on the hot desert sand to cool it and alongside were four *moons*[65] filled with cold drinking water. The thatched roof provided a shady cover. A beautiful girl was sitting on a hexagonal stool near the water pitchers. She was clad in a heavily pleated *lehanga*[66], a *cheent*[67] *fentiya*[68], laced *kanchali*[69] and an orange

[65] These are large-sized earthen pitchers for storing water and keeping it cool in the dry heat of the desert.
[66] A traditional long skirt.
[67] A traditional block-printed cloth.
[68] A traditional decorative apron for women tucked at the waist and dropping to the toes.
[69] A short blouse with sleeves.

odhani[70]. Ivory bangles, silver necklaces and a multiplicity of earrings added colour and festive look to the dress. Thus dressed gorgeously, the fair maiden sat there stylishly as if eagerly awaiting someone. Perspiring profusely, a dumbfounded Narain Singh dismounted from his horse.

When Narain Singh requested for water, with a bewitching smile and in an extra sweet voice she said, "*Kunwarji*[71] ! Allow yourself to dry. You will catch cold if you drink cold water while still perspiring. Rest for a while. You can then drink water to your heart's content."

The lass was sweet and clever in her talking. She was strikingly beautiful and had a sonorous voice. Narain Singh sat on the nearby string cot. He was curious and asked, "Why have you opened a drinking water *Piao* at such a remote and lonely place?"

"To serve the travelers, sir!" The lass answered smartly. "It is immensely satisfying even if a single *Kunwar* like you quenches his thirst here in a whole day. Here! Please have some cold water now." Moving with grace, she now filled a shining copper jug from one of the *moons* and helped Narain Singh to wash his hands. Narain Singh now cupped his hands around his mouth to drink water ... and suddenly the lass backed off.

"I had almost forgotten *Kunwarji*! There is one custom of my *Piao*. That is, whosoever comes to drink water at my *Piao* has first to eat two *rotis*[72]. Only then can I give you water. Please accept the *rotis* first and only then only I will be in a position to give you water to drink."

Irritated, Narain Singh answered, "My mother is ill, and I have to reach her before dusk. Please quickly give water to my horse and me. I will pay you well. I will satisfy your custom of eating two *rotis* on my return trip. Please hurry up for now."

The lass put the water jug down. She said, "Whatever happens, you have to follow our custom. This is what our elders have taught us. We would rather die than break our tradition. You either eat the *rotis* and then drink water, or you can go on with your journey. It is your choice"

Narain Singh was helpless. He could have tolerated his own thirst but it was necessary to give water to the horse. The horse was very thirsty. Green froth was coming from its mouth. Even though Narain Singh wanted to reach his mother as soon as possible and therefore did not want to lose any time, he had no choice. He reluctantly agreed to eat. Following the instructions of the lass, he took off his *pagarkhis*[73], kept them and his empty water bag and sword near the cot, and followed her.

The lass went to a hut behind the shed. It was a huge hut. She lifted a grass mat curtain at the entrance door revealing comfortable mattress and cushions on the floor inside the hut. She gently offered a seat to Narain Singh on one of the mattress. Then

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[70] A mantilla.

[71] This is a general respectful appellation used for the heir of a *zamindar* or a wealthy family

[72] Flat pancake like bread rolled from wheat flour and roasted on fire

[73] A form of hand-crafted Rajasthani footwear, sometimes with artistic and colourful embroidery.

she got a traditional low octagonal stool, a kind of a low-level individual dining table. She softly put it in the center of the hut and said, "I will now fetch some food for you. You please take your seat in front of the stool."

Narain Singh had just taken his first step near the stool when there was sharp rustling and creaking under his feet and in a flash, the ground under him caved in. He felt as if an earthquake hit him. Before he could understand anything, he had fallen down into a pit. It was pitch dark inside. When he tried to feel his surroundings, he felt that the walls were very slippery. The walls were smeared with oil. He tried to climb out of it but it was extremely slippery and every time he slipped down. His coughing echoed. He realized that he was in a deep pit. It took him no time to realize that he had fallen in the clutches of thugs. He was very worried that this would delay his meeting with his sick mother. What was he to do now? He sat down feeling helpless. He started thinking of a strategy to come out of this hole.

After some time he heard some crackle of leaves and sound of moving feet. Something creaked. Holding a *deevad*[74] in one hand and a spear in the other, it was the same girl. She was now looking ferocious. She thundered, "What are the valuables that you are carrying? Hurry Up! Hand over everything that you have to me, now."

Narain Singh had some little cash and wore a pair of gold earrings. He handed all those to her. He did not have much cash as he had left home in a hurry as soon as he received the news about his mother's illness. He now said, "You have taken all my money. Now let me go. I have to reach my ailing mother. You rob people with the excuse of providing water, you vicious serpent! You, a woman, carry out such heinous crimes?"

Hearing a sermon from him, the woman was seething with rage. She was about to hit Narain Singh with her spear, when he again said, "Probably you will kill me or may be I will kill you even though I am unarmed. But tell me. Why do you indulge in such activities? I am curious to know before I die."

Impressed by the bravery of the man, the woman said, "This is our profession. This is our bread and butter. We survive on it."

Narain Singh wanted to keep her engaged. He again asked her, "Is it that you only earn and every one else in the family feeds on it?"

"Yes! This is the tradition of our family."

"What will happen when you get married?"

She was startled to hear this unexpected question. Her boy friend had married another woman. He had rejected Harjot, notwithstanding her beauty, because he got wind of her murderous robbing activities. That man never again came even close. Narain Singh had touched a raw nerve. She felt somewhat dizzy. Her head was reeling. She however mustered enough courage and said, "I will give it up after my marriage. Then my younger sister will take over. This is our custom...but how does that concern you?"

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[74] An oil lamp.

"Is it only you who murders men and women and risk her life?" Narain Singh continued.

"What is it to you? You mind your own business," she tersely said. She now bent down to pick up the jewellery and money. In the twinkling of an eye, Narain Singh who was looking for an opportunity, jumped up and caught her hand. The woman lost her balance and could not regain it. She fell into the pit. She was bleeding at her mouth and forehead. Narain Singh now saw his opportunity. Like lightening, he leaped and snatched her spear. With his other hand, he caught hold of her by her long beautiful tresses and said, "Now keep your mouth shut and stay where you are. I am going. You say one word and I will kill you with your own spear."

After a short pause, he again mocked her, "Ask your family if they are willing to share your sins of murder like sharing your earnings?" Leaving her hair with a jerk, he vaulted out of the pit with the aid of the spear. He quickly gave some water to his horse and quenched his own thirst too. With the spear still in his hand, he now mounted his horse and galloped to resume his journey to his mother's place.

Harjot felt stunned as well as defeated. When hungry, tired, and trapped in the deep slippery pit, even the bravest of men would be scared at seeing the sharp shiny spear. This man had been an exception. He was the first person who had defeated her. His words were still echoing in her ears- .... Ask your family if they are willing to share your sins of murder as they share your earnings...

A feeling of remorse now overtook her. She realized that she had ruined so many homes! So many widows! So many orphans! Oh!! Her head was reeling.

Harjot was in a daze for a long time. She came out of her trance only when she heard her father's voice. He held a bamboo ladder for her to come out. She slowly climbed the ladder and walked to her old father. Sobbing, she came forward to embrace him but he stepped back. He was mad at her, deeply disappointed that the prey had escaped. When her brothers got to know, they too were furious. Her mother also made biting comments. Her sisters-in-law taunted, "We were watching from the window of the hut. Our dear Harjot was busy in a sweet chatter with the traveler. She must have fallen for him. That is why she let go of the handsome young man."

Harjot's heart bled for Narain Singh. Should she have trapped that stranger? Or else could she herself have fled with him? Why did she ever target that warrior...?

Suddenly all her family members, as if in chorus, yelled and taunted her, "Bitch! What are you waiting for? Go back and sit in that water-hut! We had a solitary customer so late in the day and you allowed him to get away!"

Harjot felt sick in her heart when her brothers insulted her in this manner. It was the first time that someone had escaped and yet the whole family was baying for her blood.

The whole incident left an indelible impression on Harjot's mind. After that day, she was not able to kill any man or woman with her spear. Because of the fear of her parents, she would still trap travelers in the pit but would not be able to proceed thereafter.

She used to develop cold feet. She would often ask each member of her family, "Who would bear the consequences of the sin of murder?" The answer without hesitation was always, "Who else. It is always the one who carries out the sin." The same answer, always!

Even though her mother understood her dilemma and the accompanying mental turmoil, she would still try to cajole her, "Harjot, my dear daughter! These days why do you talk of such crazy things? This is our profession. Our profession is our religion. There is no sin in following our religion."

Days passed by. Harjot did not rob any more travelers. Her parents and brothers were exasperated and decided to shift base. They started packing up their huts and sheds.

That day, at dusk, Harjot was sitting on parapet of the well and pulling out water. She saw a traveler. She was incredulous when she recognized him. Tears of repentance rolled down her cheeks. While offering water to the traveler, her warm tears mingled with the cold water. She was near hysterical in her sobs.

The traveler was none other than Narain Singh, who was returning after visiting his mother. He saw the girl's sobbing and thought, she is again up to some tricks! Scornfully, he said, "You thug! What is the new game now?" Harjot sorrowfully recounted to him all that had transpired in the fortnight since his escape. Narain Singh felt pity for her. By nature, he was chivalrous. She had been brave to defy her family. Such a brave hearted girl does not belong in the house of thugs. She should really be the bride in a Rajput *haveli*. Narain Singh thought no more. He took Harjot's hand, lifted her on his saddle on the horse and galloped away.

Soon the thug settlement was left far behind!

CYNICAL KING

KING Surveer was the ruler of a village called Sojat. *Mehendi*[75], *Jeera*[76] *and Dhania*[77] were the main crops of Sojat. Year after year, they grew in abundance. The state was very prosperous. The king's treasure was growing bigger every year.

King Surveer was a cynical person. He was a fool as well as a coward. He would say, "I will do something unique. Something that none of my ancestors have ever done!" In his foolishness, sometimes he did stupid things that were shocking. The King was a dim-witted man. He would thus often misunderstand jokes or things said in jest. He had intelligent courtiers but they were discreet and generally kept quiet. As a King and ruler of his kingdom, he had absolute authority and power. His entire staff would thus be eager to follow his instructions. Despite all his shortcomings, the King had one good attribute. He liked to speak the truth. He hated liars and even did not hesitate to hang a liar.

His old ministers managed the kingdom for him. Sometimes the ministers would be miserable because of his crazy actions or conduct. They had served him for a long number of years and were now old. Some had failing eyesight too.

One day the King gave to one of his senior ministers an important notification to read. With his failing eyesight, the minister had difficulty in reading the message. He gave it to a young courtier to read. The King noticed it. Whimsical as he was, he insulted the senior minister in presence of all the court. He finally said, "When your eyesight is failing, what is the point in you continuing as a minister? He then snatched the notice from the courtier and said, "Reading a King's notification is the responsibility of the minister only. Not yours! Now this notice will be read only when I appoint a new minister."

All the ministers were taken aback. One of them took the courage to politely point out, "Sir! Our state has a tradition that the King's son becomes the next King and in the same way a minister's son becomes the next minister..."

Cutting him short, King Surveer snapped, "King's son will be the next King but ministers sons will not automatically succeed their sons. I will decide who the new minister will be?" Then in yet another fit of craziness, he said, "I will make that young man a minister who brings to me five liars by tomorrow morning. For sure, I will make only that person as my minister."

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[75] Henna

[76] Coriander

[77] Cumin

The senior ministers were dumbfounded. King Surveer tore down a centuries old custom of hereditary ministership in a flash, by his crazy act. The senior minister's intelligent son was the rightful successor but the King's action would deprive him of his hereditary right.

No one could stop the King. He made an immediate announcement, "The man who wants to become the next minister should bring five liars to the court of the King by tomorrow morning. The person who brings five greatest liars to me will be appointed the minister."

It did not appear to be a difficult job to catch five liars. Some young men were very happy and even clapped. Some of them had already started dreaming of becoming a minister. However, when the senior citizens heard the announcement they were utterly dismayed. In disbelief, they clasped their heads in their hands. They felt that the end of their kingdom was not far.

The minister came back to his *haveli*. He did not want to let go of the hereditary right of his eminently qualified son Kishore Singh to become a minister. He quickly apprised his son of the developments in the court. Kishore Singh too was amazed. He had also never heard anything so strange.

The next day the King was to select the minister. The father and son duo decided that they had to save ministership of Sojat state at any cost. The position was rightfully their heritage. They had to find a way keep the post within the family and yet meet the requirements set by the King. The retiring minister had a long and secret talk with his son. Then Kishore Singh left home, alone in a disguise.

First, Kishore Singh reached a shop of traditional *pagarkhis*[78]. There was a display of many beautiful pairs of *pagarkhis*. He asked, "Hello brother! What is the price of this Jodhpur style pair?" The shop owner was idling away his time as he had no customer since the morning. He now did not want to lose his first customer. He was therefore extra nice and said, "*Sethji*! This is your own shop. Give whatever you want. An *anna*[79] up and an *anna* down does not...."

Kishoresingh did not let the man complete his sentence and took that footwear. Then he kept one *anna* on the upper step and one *anna* on the lower step of the staircase leading to the shop, and started walking away. A startled shopkeeper said, "Sir! Please ... pay for them... the cost of the pair is five rupees." Kishore Singh retorted, "Excuse me...you are going back on your words. I have given you the amount you had asked for. You said an *anna* up and an *anna* down. I have kept an *anna* on the upper step as well as an *anna* on the step going down. What else do you want now?"

The shopkeeper was shocked. He had met such a stupid customer for the first time. The shopkeeper ran out and called a soldier from the street corner. The soldier could not judge who was right. He said that if Kishore Singh is lying he would be hanged but the King judges such issues. He ordered, "I will take you to the King". This is exactly what Kishore Singh wanted.

The soldier locked a handcuff on one wrist of Kishore Singh. The other end of the handcuff was tied to the soldier's belt so that Kishore Singh could not escape. Kishore Singh meekly followed the soldier. The shopkeeper also came along.

After a while, Kishore Singh saw a *tilpapdi*[80] shop. He insisted on stopping at the shop. There was a display of thin round delicate and mouth-watering *tilpapdis* of Beawar city. Silver foil pasted on the face of each cake added a decorative touch. There was also an aroma emanating from a sprinkling of dried rose petals and grated pistachios on top. A merchant also came to that shop. The merchant gave three rupees to the shop owner and got busy chatting with other customers. The shop owner said, "*Sethji*! Pick up three big *tilpapdis*." Engrossed in his chat, the merchant did not pay attention to what the shop owner had said. Kishore Singh quickly grabbed three *tilpapdis*. He distributed one to the soldier and the other to the owner of the *pagarkhi* shop. He himself ate the third one. When the sweet shop owner asked for money, Kishore Singh feigned annoyance. He said,

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[78] Hand-crafted Rajasthani footwear, sometimes with artistic and colourful embroidery.

[79] Until the Indian currency was decimalized after independence, 16 *annas* made a rupee.

[80] A wafer-thin flat pancake-like local sweet made from *til* (sesame) seeds and sugar.

"When did I ask for your *tilpapdis*? It was you who offered them to me, saying, '*Sethji*, pick up three *tilpapdis*'. Since I am also a *Seth* I accepted your offer. How would I know which *Seth* you are talking to? You should have named the *Seth*. Do you understand it now? There is no need to falsely blame me."

The shop owner was clever and did not want to get into an argument. He said, "We will take the matter to the King. He will only decide who is telling the truth and who is lying." That was exactly what Kishore Singh wanted. It perfectly fitted his plan.

The soldier asked the sweet shop owner to also accompany him along with the *pagarkhi* shop owner, to get justice from the King.

After walking a little distance, they reached a stable. It housed the best horses and mares. Feigning surprise, Kishore Singh asked, "Who owns these fine horses?"

"The King, who else", answered the soldier?

A number of *syces*[81] were looking after the horses. One of the *syce* had difficulty in controlling an agitated black mare. All of a sudden, the mare was out of control and started running away. In a state of despair, its *syce* muttered, "You troublesome mare! If I get my hands on you again, I will chop off your head."

Kishore Singh heard that remark. When he saw the mare approaching him, in a flash with his free hand he snatched the sword of the soldier. In one swift stroke he chopped off the mare's head before anyone had a chance to react.

There was a big commotion. All the *syces* came cursing Kishore Singh and surrounded him. The stable's supervisor *syce* said, "You fool! What have you done? That was the best and the King's favourite Arab mare. You have killed it. The King will hang all of us. All of us will die with you.

Again feigning innocence, Kishore Singh answered, "The *syce* of that black mare had said, "You troublesome mare! If I get my hands on you again, I will chop off your head." I only did what he wanted. Am I lying? Why are you blaming me and threatening to get me hanged. The supervisor *syce* was fuming. He said, "You mad creature! We will take you to the King." The soldier escorting Kishore Singh said, "Come along, we are already going to see the King."

The soldier was now escorting Kishore Singh, the *pagarkhi* maker, the sweet seller and the *syce*, all to the court of the King.

On their way, they passed by a suburb housing many perfume sellers. The soldier was attracted to the various sweet fragrances. He stopped at one of the houses of the perfume sellers to inhale the aroma. The perfume seller, Munnawar Bhai gave the soldier a cup of scented oil. Kishore Singh came forward and asked, "Sir! Would you be kind enough to allow me to mop up the droppings of the scented oil on the floor and massage my scalp with it?"

Munnawar Bhai took pity on the handcuffed Kishore Singh. He said, "Sure brother! Sure." Kishore Singh promptly started massaging his scalp. Munnawar Bhai's son was

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[81] A groom, a stable hand or other attendant for horses.

around, playing *guilli-danda*[82]. His flying *gulli* accidentally fell in the oil cup and the oil splashed over Kishore Singh. His clothes were soiled.

Kishore Singh was infuriated. He said, "Now get me a fresh dress immediately. How will I otherwise face the King in these dirty soiled clothes?" Realizing that the situation was getting out of hand, Munnawar Bhai tried to calm him. He said, "Oh dear, spilling of oil is actually a sign of good luck. Who knows, may be, the King will pardon you because of your good luck."

Kishore Singh pretended innocence and asked, "Does spilling of oil really bring good luck? If half a cup of spilled oil can get King's pardon, what will happen if a big container of oil spills?" Munnawar Bhai was annoyed and felt trapped. He was anxious to close the conversation, and somehow be rid of his irritating questions. "Yes, that will bring even greater good luck", he said.

"And if a whole earthen-pitcher of oil spills...?"

"It will bring good luck to the whole family."

"And what if two earthen-pitchers of oil spill..?"

"Then all the neighbours, relatives, everyone will get good luck!"

From the corner of his eye, Kishore Singh saw that there were oil filled earthen-pitchers all around him and so he asked, "What if seven earthen-pitchers of oil spill?"

"Then your seven generations will be benefited with good luck." Munnawar Bhai answered. One question had led to another and he had been answering the questions almost mechanically, with the sole purpose of seeing the back of a seemingly mad Kishore Singh.

That was it. Kishore Singh did not wait another moment. He looked around in the house. A number of huge oil-filled earthen-pitchers were lying on one side. In a lightening move, Kishore Singh snatched the *gulli* from the child and aimed at the center of a big earthen-pitcher. Then he took the *danda* (bat) and aimed the second earthen-pitcher. He lifted the brass cup and threw it on the third earthen-pitcher. He also snatched the staff of the soldier and broke the fourth earthen-pitcher. Pitcher after pitcher got broken. The spilled scented oil was flowing all over the place. The oil flowed through the veranda and the drain on to the road.

Munnawar Bhai, the unfortunate perfume seller, shouted, "Can someone take away this mad man!" The soldier who was stunned by the quick turn of events was now aroused. He caught hold of Kishore Singh's hand pulled him away and threatened, "You do not care because you know that you will be hanged anyway. Idiot! Why do you break these earthen-pitchers before you die? You have caused such a big loss for the unfortunate perfume merchant.

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[82] A local outdoor game played between two teams in which a *gulli* (similar to a bail in cricket) is hit with *danda*, a bat-like stick.

"Loss? What kind of loss? I was only enabling him to get good luck and salvation for his seven generations. You stopped me at only four. If I am lying ask the perfume merchant..."

The perfume merchant Munnawar Bhai was fuming. He said, "Take him to the King. He does not know what awaits him there." He then pointed a menacing finger towards him, and sarcastically said, "I will get you your salvation there!"

The soldier dragged the handcuffed Kishore Singh and had the *pagarkhi* seller, the sweet seller, the *syce* and the perfume merchant Munnawar Bhai following him to the King's court.

After walking some distance, they could see some big and palatial buildings. Again pretending innocence, Kishore Singh excitedly asked, "My dear brother! Who owns these beautiful buildings?"

" Fool! King! Who else?

"What did you say? Fool King's palaces? See soldier, you called me mad many times. You can however never call our King a fool. He is the respected ruler of this state - our provider - our lord! You are a traitor. You called the King a fool. I will beat you for saying that." Kishore Singh lifted his handcuffed and the other hand together and hit the soldier on his head. The metal handcuff hurt the soldier badly.

The pitiable soldier was tired of Kishore Singh's strange and apparently foolish behaviour. He rubbed his head where he had taken the heavy blow of Kishore Singh's handcuffed hand. He was still trying to figure out how he could make this fool understand. He was surely going to get hanged and yet he was out of his senses. He said, "You will soon know. When the King sentences you to death, you will know who is a fool after all."

The soldier appeared in the King's court with Kishore Singh and all his victims. The King ordered that all the crimes be taken up only after selection of a new minister. He also ordered that for the night, all the parties be locked in the cattle shed.

Early next morning, the King convened his court. Wearing his resplendent royal robe he sat on the throne. All the ministers and courtiers took their seats. Only the retiring minister's seat was vacant. The King repeated the announcement that he would appoint the person who caught five greatest liars as a minister. He also announced that if anyone blames any person wrongly for lying, he will be punished by hanging.

The announcement by the King of a punishment for any wrong accusation scared most of the aspirants. The severity of punishment forced them to rethink. Most of them ran away. A few tried their luck but were unable to carry conviction.

The boring and unsuccessful attempts of some of the earlier aspirants had already irritated the King. When Kishore Singh's turn came, he sternly said, "Look young man, be brief. For each of the 'liars' you have brought, say what you have to, but briefly". Then he turned to the five persons who had come with Kishore Singh. He directed them also to give their answers to the accusations by no more than a 'yes' or a 'no'. Displaying

his usual craziness, he warned all of them, "You say one word extra and you will be hanged."

Kishore Singh stepped forward. He respectfully bowed and saluted the King. He now called the shop owner of *pagarkhis* and said to him, "Brother shoemaker! When I asked you for the price of the *pagarkhis*, did you not say, "an *anna* up and an *anna* down?"

"Yes", said the shoemaker.

"Then you asked five rupees for the same *pagarkhis*?"

"Yes".

Without waiting another moment, Kishore Singh moved to the sweet seller and politely asked him, "Brother, now did you not say, "pick up three nice big *tilpapdis?"*

"Yes. But that I said to the *Sethji*, not to you."

The King thundered in between, "This liar has defied my instructions in answering in more than 'yes' or 'no'. Take him away...."

Kishore Singh now addressed the stable *syce*. "Did you say or not that if you get your hands on the mare again, you will chop off its head?"

"Yes" answered the *syce*.

"When I did the job for you, you threatened me with hanging."

"Yes", ... meekly answered the *syce*.

Munnawar Bhai, the perfume merchant, was shivering with fright and dreading his turn. Even without questioning, he volunteered, "My Lord, I did say that spilling of oil gets good luck. But ...", and he looked at the King to fathom his reaction. He could complete his sentence very feebly, "Sir, then he broke four big oil-filled earthen-pitchers of mine without any provocation."

The King did not have the patience to pay attention or hear the second part of his submission. He had already judged him! "You are a liar", snapped the King and ordered that he be hanged.

It was now the turn of the soldier. Kishore Singh shook him by the shoulder and asked, "I asked you, who owned these royal buildings, and did you not say, 'fool king'."

"Yes, but I had called you a fool, not the King."

The King's attention waned once he heard 'yes'. He now excitedly clapped with joy. He got up from his throne and announced, "My dear ministers and courtiers! Here is our new minister. With his smartness, he caught the five greatest liars of my state. Now go and prepare for a feast of celebration." Immersed in the happiness of his own foolish thoughts, the King asked, "My new minister! How do you wish to mark the beginning of this happy day?"

Kishore Singh thought carefully and said, "Sir, with a celebratory drinking party - a clanking of wine glasses!"

"Amazing! Fantastic! What a wonderful idea", the King said jubilantly.

Liquor flowed freely and the King got drunk. Kishore Singh, who never touched liquor had only fruit juice and thus remained sane. After the King was fully drunk, the new minister courteously asked him, "Sir, we are celebrating your brilliance. If you approve, could we pardon all the persons who got the death penalty today? They will all bless you."

The King said "No" in an inaudible voice. The next moment, the whimsical King changed his mind and now raising his voice said "Yes!"

Kishore Singh was relieved to hear the 'Yes'. Acting quickly on the King's approval, he was happy to release all the innocent prisoners. He thus brought to a happy end the plan he jointly prepared with his father, the retiring minister, to save his hereditary right to succeed his father as a minister. Thereafter, he had constantly to use his intelligence and cleverness to find ways to divert the King away from his crazy ideas. He justly administered the kingdom for many years. Sojat's residents were very happy to have such a wise minister and its prosperity continued to grow.

❑

BIRTH OF A NEEDLE

A fairy named Suina lived in heaven. She used to stitch beautiful clothes. She had a special needle. She would stitch clothes and then embroider colourful flowers on them. Residents of the heaven vied with each other to wear clothes stitched by Suina. Unpretentious of her excellence, Suina kept herself busy in her stitching work. Her work was everything to her. She was unaffected by words of appreciation or criticism.

One day the Queen of heaven called Suina and asked her to stitch a dress for her. When the dress was ready, the queen was delighted to see it. She was amazed to see the beautiful flowers embroidered on the dress. It was also very comfortable to wear. It was a nice fit, neither too tight nor too loose. It fitted very well on the beautiful and delicate body of the queen. The Queen felt very much at ease as if she wore nothing. Pleased with the handicraft, the queen rewarded Suina with a necklace of pearls, extracted during mythological churning of the sea.

One day the Queen noticed that the princesses were wearing very ill fitting dresses. In addition, the girls just whiled away their time wandering in the gardens or near the river and ponds. The Queen got an idea. Why not keep her daughters busy by engaging them in some useful vocation such as stitching? And who would be a better choice than Suina to teach them stitching?

The Queen wanted to consult her friends. She said, "The princesses are not occupied. They do nothing except roam around the whole day. I do not like it at all. I wish that along with playing and enjoying, they also learn something constructive."

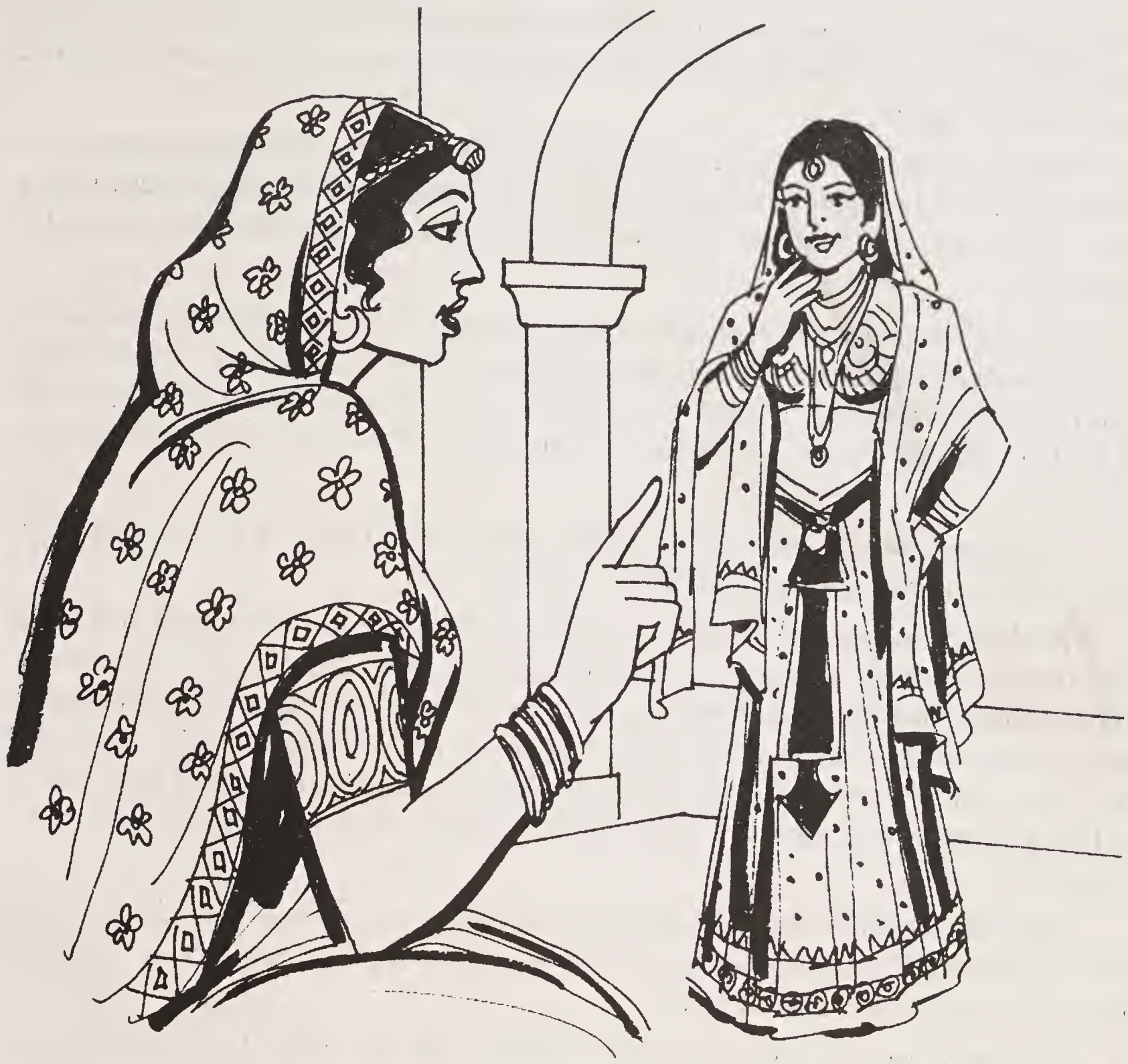
Her friends said, "The princesses will enjoy stitching colourful clothes and embroidering beautiful flowers on them." Goddess Saraswati added, "The flowers of Nandanvan would be a great source to select colours."

''I like this suggestion of yours. I will send a message to Suina over sound waves to be here right away", said the Queen.

Saraswati, addressing the Queen said, "Is fairy Suina our best or only choice of a stitching and embroidery teacher in heaven. It is quite possible that there are even better teachers. You should select the best expert in stitching the princesses. Then that fairy alone should teach them."

"Amazing! Saraswati, amazing! You have no peers. You are brilliant. Now you have to also advise me how to go about selecting the best teacher in stitching and embroidery?"

"I will be glad to," said Saraswati. "We will organize a festival. All fairies in heaven will be eligible to participate. We will request all participants to make one dress. The one who submits the best dress will be considered the fairy of art work."



The Queen liked this idea very much. She said, "Goddess Saraswati, as the goddess of knowledge, you have the responsibility to select the best artist." Saraswati agreed to abide by the wishes of the queen.

It was the day of the festival. Heaven was abuzz with activity. Fairies were stitching clothes. Suina was also participating. Everyone had prepared colourful dresses. They were also trying to embroider the dresses with the most beautiful flowers in different styles, with finest threads. It seemed as if the variety of beautiful colours of the embroidery work were vying with the rainbow colours of the spring flowers. The allotted time for the competition was soon over. All the dresses entered in the competition were collected. The dress prepared by Suina's was different from the other dresses. It was the most beautiful one. It was no surprise that it was judged as the best. There was no cheating or jealousy in heaven and everyone heartily congratulated Suina.

As planned, Suina began teaching the art of stitching to the princesses. The princesses were devoted and learning diligently. The other fairies in heaven continued to give their stitching work to Suina. As a result, she was very busy now. Everyone appreciated her work.

Slowly, the praise went to Suina's head. In a short time, Suina began feeling proud of herself. She was arrogant in talking to others. She would avoid stitching work of other fairies. The care and affection with which she used to teach the princesses also decreased.

The festival of *Basant Panchami*[83] was around the corner. Goddess Saraswati went to Suina to get a dress stitched for the occasion. She lovingly said, "Dear Suina, tomorrow is the festival of *Basant Panchami*. Could you please stitch this dress for me by the evening? So far I have never been fortunate to wear a dress stitched by you."

Displaying both arrogance and irritation, Suina said, "I am sick of stitching. Why don't you find some other fairy to do this job for you?"

Goddess Saraswati was appalled and taken aback. She was wide-eyed and could only stare in disbelief. Arrogance, deception and jealousy were unthinkable in heaven. Saraswati immediately went to the Queen. The Queen had already heard tales of Suina's egoistic and arrogant behaviour from other fairies as well. Saraswati said, "It is really a pity that such a wonderful artist of heaven has developed this kind of ego. She is swollen with pride and does not treat others as equals. It seems like she is close to her end."

The Queen urgently summoned Suina. Immersed in her conceit, Suina did not spare even the Queen. She came and said, "Queen of heaven, please be brief in whatever you say. I have loads of work to do!"

The Queen was stunned and admonished her, "Oh fairy, have you forgotten that you are a fairy of heaven? And anyone who displays ego is sent down to earth?"

Hearing it, Suina started trembling with fright. She quickly realized that she had committed a grave crime in her arrogance. This was unpardonable in heaven and she had to go down to earth.

The Queen said, "Your dispatch to earth is inescapable. However, since you are an artist I am giving you a chance to choose the form in which you want to go to earth. Tell me! What form would you like to take on earth?"

A weary Suina said, "Oh revered Queen! You decide the form in which men and women of earth would love and respect me. To atone for my sins, I would be happy to spend a life of care and compassion for the people on earth."

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[83] It is festival which heralds the onset of spring and is celebrated by wearing colourful yellow dresses.

At that moment, a human being appeared through the many splendoured clouds. Leaves and deerskin covered his body.

The surprised Queen of heaven asked him, "Oh human being! How did you get to reach heaven in your earthly form?"

The human said, "Oh Queen of heaven! In my life, I was very caring and compassionate and helped everyone. I also carried out penance and prayers. I was therefore rewarded with this visit to heaven. I am now visiting."

The Queen said, "Please tell us whatever is on your mind?"

With great humility, the human being said, "Oh goddess and Queen of heaven! We humans cover our bodies with leaves and leather. We have many cotton plants on earth that blossom with yellow cotton pods. When the pods dry, they open up revealing white and soft cotton inside. We, the residents of earth, collect this cotton and spin thin and thick yarns by hand. We use these yarns to weave coarse cloth on wooden frames. We however do not know how to stitch wearable clothes. We wrap or tie this coarse cloth around us. However, when we do outdoor work, it is blown away from our body in gusts of heavy wind. We need to wear clothes to protect ourselves in winters, summers and rains. Supreme God has sent me here to heaven to learn to stitch clothes."

When Suina heard the pleadings of the human, she was moved with compassion and said, "Queen, please send me on earth as a needle. With my help as a needle, the men and women on earth will learn how to stitch."

The Queen said, "So be it. I grant you your wish."

In a flash, the beautiful Suina turned into a shining needle. She instantly fell down on earth. When she fell, the impact flattened the needle's end on which it landed on earth. This is why the needle on earth is flat at one end and is sharp at the other. The needles in heaven even now are sharp at both ends and the thread is strung in the middle.

This was the birth of the era of needle on the earth. Since then, the needle serves both rich and poor with equal dedication!

WHOSE GOLD MOHURS

IT is a story of hundreds of years ago. Near the city of Jaipur, King Shailendraraj used to rule the state of Amber. He was not only imposing in his appearance but also generous. His muscular build and six-footer personality with fair complexion charmed people. Needy and helpless persons were never disappointed. They never returned empty-handed from his door. He was the darling of the people of Amber who would fondly compare and put him on the same pedestal as the legendry hero *Karan*[84] of *Mahabharat.*

The kingdom of King Shailendraraj was very wealthy. It was believed that his treasure was always growing only because of his kindness and generosity.

One day a poor Brahmin, Chaturbhuj, came to the King's court and pleaded his helplessness thus, "My revered kind-hearted King! My eyesight has deteriorated because of an attack of smallpox. I can no longer read my scriptures. I cannot do any other work also. There is no other earning member in the family. My parents are old. My wife is busy taking care of the household and my parents. The only child I have is a two-year-old daughter. How am I to feed five members of the family without an income? Please have mercy on me."

His woes moved the King. He gave him a gold *mohur*[85] and said, "Take this gold *mohur*. Today is *Poornima*[86]. This *mohur* will help you feed the members of your family for a month. After this, you can come again every *Poornima* and I will give you a *mohur* for the next month."

Chaturbhuj was very happy and relieved. Heartily blessing the King, he said, "May God grant you twenty one *mohurs* for every *mohur* that you give me."

Clutching the shining *mohur* in his hand, he happily returned home.

On each *Poornima* he would return to the King's palace and keeping his promise the King would again give him a *mohur*. Every month the Brahmin would repeat his blessing and say, "May God grant you twenty-one *mohurs* for every *mohur* that you have given me."

Fifteen years happily passed for Chaturbhuj. He always got his *mohur* every *Poornima* and he religiously and sincerely repeated his blessings for the King. The

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[84] In the mythological Indian epic *Mahabharat*, *Karan* was the off spring of the god Sun and princess *Kunti.* He was a great philanthropist who was known to keep his word under all odds and did not hesitate to even donate his living body and bones to fulfil! his promise to a sage given many years earlier.

[85] A gold coin worth about 15 rupees used in British India in the 19th and early 20th centuries

[86] A full-moon night.

Brahmin's parents had now died. His daughter was now a seventeen-year-old young girl. The Brahmin was thinking of her marriage. He thought it was time to save some money for her wedding.

However, some Brahmins of the Amber city were feeling jealous of Chaturbhuj. They believed that Chaturbhuj was enjoying an easy happy life without even a token effort to earn his living. He had a cozy time, coolly collecting a *mohur* at the end of the month, every *Poornima*. The King is happy with just his empty blessing. For the rest of the month, the Brahmin was living comfortably without making any endeavor to earn his livelihood. Chaturbhuj's jealous brethren felt that they too had an equal right on the *mohurs* from the King's treasure.

The jealous talk first started in whispers. Later, it became a talk of the town. At last, a Brahmin who had the ear of the treasurer told him, "Sir! Chaturbhuj is taking one *mohur* on each *Poornima* for the last fifteen years. In return what does he do? He blesses the King – may God give you twenty-one mohurs for each *mohur!!*. This is absolute cheating and fraud. That useless Brahmin is just a parasite. He gives baloney

blessings and pockets a *mohur* every time without any exertion. Anyone can give such blessings." The jealous Brahmin similarly poisoned the ears of many other courtiers against Chaturbhuj.

After some time, the clever complainant sensed some receptivity. He sensed that the treasurer was starting to appreciate his point. He now decided to step up his tirade against Chaturbhuj and argued, "Sir, do you have enough money in your treasury to endlessly fill the pockets of such worthless and lazy persons? Chaturbhuj should show the effectiveness of his blessings and produce twenty-one *mohurs* for the King's treasury for every *mohur* given to him. Or else you should immediately stop the doling out of *mohurs* to him. The state has already bled for long years."

The treasurer could not dispute the logic. Looking for an opportunity, one day when he was in royal court with the King, he said, "My lord, every month a Brahmin comes and takes a *mohur* for some ineffective blessing. Your kingship may like to ask him if by the power of his blessing he can even once produce twenty-one *mohurs* for your treasury for every *mohur* given to him. If he cannot, he should return all the *mohurs* taken by him so far. We should not let a perception gain credence that he has been defrauding the King all these years.."

All the courtiers nodded their heads, as if in approval and eagerly waited for the King's reaction. The King could easily gauge the mood of the court and did not wish the ministers and courtiers to go away with any impression that his decisions were whimsical or lacking sound judgment. He wished to carry all his trusted and senior advisors with him in the governance of the kingdom. He believed that they should fully appreciate his working and understand his decisions. He announced that he would think over the matter. In his mind, he had decided first to ask the Brahmin and know what he had to say.

Soon another *Poornima* came. As per his commitment, the King gave a *mohur* to the Brahmin.As usual, the Brahmin gave his usual blessing - may God give you twenty-one *mohurs* for one *mohur*. The King was waiting for this moment and promptly asked, "Oh Brahmin! You are every time blessing me with "twenty-one *mohurs* for each *mohur"* but there seems to be no indication that it is happening. Then what is the meaning of your blessing? You have to either show the twenty-one *mohurs* for one *mohur* or elucidate the meaning of your blessing. There is also a clamour by some of my subjects that in case you cannot prove the efficacy of your blessings, you should return all the *mohurs* you have taken so far."

The poor Brahmin was dumbfounded. Because of the fear, even the *mohur* slipped out of his hand. When he bent down to pick it up, he felt dizzy. A blessing is about wishing someone well. How could it be taken literally in its material sense? However, he could not give up. Summoning up enough courage, he said, "My King Sir, you have been graciously looking after my family for the past fifteen years. I seek just one more week's time to respond to your doubts." The King readily granted the request.

The Brahmin returned home. He pulled out the *mohur* from his coat pocket and handed it over to his wife. Normally, every *Poornima*, when Chaturbhuj returned from

the King's palace with his gold *mohur*, he would be happy and cherubic. Today, his seventeen-year-old daughter Roopa instead noticed a gloomy mood and was surprised. It needed only a little prodding from her for him to narrate the whole incident and the King's unanswered query. He concluded sadly, "It is bad enough that our source of monthly income is gone but how am I to pay back all the one hundred and eighty one *mohurs* that have been given to me by the King in the last 15 years or 181 *poornimas*?"

For once, even Roopa was terrified. How would it be possible for them to raise such a large amount of money? But she did not give up hope. She reflected the whole night, thinking of the answers to the King's queries.

Next morning, Roopa told her father, "I want your permission to go to the King's court."

Chaturbhuj trusted the intelligence and wisdom of his daughter. However, she was only a young girl. But what choice did he have? When he saw no other option, he gave permission to his daughter to accompany him to the court.

Roopa appeared in the court with her father. The King was sitting on his throne. The courtiers sat in their respective seats. The beauty of the girl captivated the King. With her wheatish complexion, shapely body, aquiline nose, impressive eyes, and thin pink lips and clad in simple but graceful clothes and a few jewelry trinkets she was looking like a fairy straight from heaven. The King could not take her eyes off her.

Roopa bowed, saluted and offered her greetings to the King. Then she said, "Sir, I am the daughter of Brahmin Chaturbhuj. He is your subject and so am I. A King is like a father to all his subjects. I seek your permission to attempt giving answers to your questions and clarify your doubts.

The courtiers were spell bound. Like her beauty, her mannerism and way of speaking was equally striking. Noticing that the King was hardly able to take his gaze off her, she had cleverly likened him to a father of all his subjects. The elderly courtiers hardly missed her smartness. The King permitted Roopa to speak. At the outset she said, "Sir, first you kindly promise that you will pardon me even if I commit some childish indiscretion."

Smiling, the King nodded. Roopa now began, "My humble submission to the King is that he should not insist on further elaboration of this simple matter. One *mohur* a month to an indigent Brahmin is not a big sum for the King. So, my lord, you may not persist with your question and continue giving one *mohur* every month to my father."

Before the King could say anything, the treasurer yelled, "You foolish girl! Are you here to teach us? We will not be taken in by your bewitching talk. Do you have any answer to your father's lying and cheating? He robbed the state of *mohurs* all these years."

Roopa remained calm and composed. She now asked, "Sir, would you please tell us the source of these *mohurs*?"

An enraged treasurer screamed, "You foolish girl!"

The ministers got up.

In a swift move, the commander-in-chief pulled out his sword.

There was confusion and chaos in the court but the King without letting things go out of hand took control. He waved everyone to sit down. Impressed by the courage of the young girl, the King was curious to hear what she had to say. He decided to give her a chance to argue and put across her case. Calmly answering her question, he said, "The *mohurs* have come from the treasury."

"Sir, where did the treasury get them from?" asked Roopa

"My ancestors and I have collected it", the King coolly answered.

"Your honour! From where did you and your ancestors collect it? Sir, who gave it to your ancestors and to you?" Roopa continued unruffled.

"My subjects have given it to me as my share and as tax", said the King.

"Sir, my benevolent King, you are absolutely right! Your subjects have always been paying you tax. They have been filling your treasury. It is the duty of the subjects to fill the treasury of their King."

"What is your point?" the King impatiently asked.

"I only want to say, my lord, that when benevolent Kings like you help the needy, then the all your subjects, rich or otherwise, willingly fill your treasury regularly."

"So?" The King asked eagerly.

"Sir, they do not mind paying the tax. Thinking that it is their duty, they honestly give the King..."

"So what happens?" The King was now getting even more impatient.

"This way your treasury fills. It keeps getting filled very fast - a *mohur* soon becomes twenty-one *mohurs*, and may be even more. If you stop helping needy people like my father, it will result in a lot of unrest, uproar and discontent. And...!"

"And what more? The King, now getting to the end of his patience, asked sharply.

"Sir, then your treasures will not multiply. Your treasury will not gain wealth by day and by night. Your subjects will be hesitant to give you tax and your share. This wealth, this treasure, these *mohurs* all belongs to the subjects – they are the real contributors. Expenditure on your subjects is therefore a legitimate ...". Shailendraraj was pensive. He was forced to rethink on the duty of a benevolent King and a tax-collecting state towards his impoverished subjects during their times of need..

Noticing that the things are getting too far, both the younger brothers of the King, Vikramraj and Deependraraj, got up and pulled out their swords. Without allowing Roopa to complete her sentence, Vikramraj said, "Look, you foolish girl! Have you come here to teach us statecraft and philosophy? Yes, we recognize that your father is nearly blind. Was there no other earning member in the family to earn so that your father had to approach the King and seek a *mohur* in charity each month?"

"My respected Prince, my grandparents were old. My mother used to nurse them and look after the household. I am the only child of my parents." Roopa answered.

"If that was so, why did you keep sitting at home like a worthless mare idling its time?" The caustic comments came from the youngest brother, Deependraraj. Arrogantly, he said , "Speak up, you girl?"

"Younger prince Sir, when my gifted but enfeebled father came to the court of the King with his plea, I was only two years old. As soon as I was fourteen on the day of the fair of Veerpur, my father said to me, "You are like a son to me. Now you go and find some livelihood in the city.' Sir, I tried many a time to work at various places in the city of Amber but in vain."

"Why, what happened?" This time, with a suspicious eye, King Shailendraraj asked.

Roopa looked around and with great hesitation said, "Our Godfather, I feel ashamed to talk about it. It is not possible for young girls to step out in your kingdom. The police superintendent and the policemen ..." Roopa lowered her eyes and stopped. Pearl shaped tears rolled down her cheeks. *Tap, tap*, ..

Hearing his name from Roopa, the police superintendent was startled. He knew that Roopa was stating the truth. He squirmed and trembled with fear. Total silence descended on the court.

Besides being an illustrious and generous King, Shailendraraj was very intelligent. He had observed the smallest detail and reactions, including the squirming of the police superintendent, during the entire proceedings. He now wanted to send a clear message to his courtiers.

He rose from his throne. In a calm but imperial and firm voice he said, "This girl is mature beyond her years. She has taught us all how a benevolent King and state should correctly use its treasures and its *mohurs*.

After all, the treasure belongs to the subjects of the kingdom. The King and the courtiers are only trustees. All the treasure and the *mohurs* are only for the welfare of the citizens. Expenditure on welfare of its citizens is the legitimate duty of the state. We should not view a return of the money to the deserving and needy subjects as charity. No elderly, poor or needy person has to ever remain neglected in my state."

The King further announced, "Roopa has also done me a great favour in bringing to my notice the plight of women and young girls in my kingdom. We should all hang our heads in shame. I now order the police and security personnel to take immediate steps to make the city and the kingdom totally safe for women - young and old – at all times of the day and night." He also immediately suspended the police superintendent.

Roopa heartily praised the King by shouting his *jai-jaikar*[87]. The doubts and concerns of all the skeptical courtiers had been cleared and they also heartily joined Roopa in her *jai-jaikar* of the King.

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[87] Appreciative slogans.

GOD OF INNOCENTS

A shepherd named Gheesu lived in the village of Jobner. He used to take the goats for grazing. It was his ancestral profession. Residents of Jobner owned goats of the very finest breeds. Goat's milk was commonly used as a nutritional drink and for making yoghurt. Goat's milk was also used to make very tasty *kheer*[88] and *kadhi*[89] preparations.

Gheesu had a large open compound at the back of his house. Every morning his clients would come and leave their goats in his charge and come back in the evening to collect them. Gheesu was hardworking and exercised great vigilance in taking the goats for grazing in the forest.

The owners of the goats were very happy with Gheesu because he never ever lost any goat in the jungle. He could recognize the individual goats and treated them very tenderly. He never milked the goats to steal their milk.

Gheesu had many good qualities but in the eyes of his family and villagers, he had one big weakness. He was an atheist. He did not believe in the existence of God. He had no interest whether it was the occasion of reading of Lord *Satyanarayan's katha*[90] or recitation of *Ramayana* and *Gita*. Year after year religious festivals of *Shivratri*, *Janamashthami*, and *Ramnavmi* were celebrated. There were also community gatherings for devotional songs or *Jagrans*[91]. None of these had any curiosity or significance for Gheesu.

Gheesu was now married. His wife unlike him was very religious. Days went by and Gheesu's had children too. They also grew up. However, nothing changed for Gheesu. None of these events was able to nurture any religious feelings or reverence for God in Gheesu. The members of his family and the village elders tried to reason with him. They would argue, "You have spent half your life. At least now, you should remember God", but Gheesu was unmoved. He was content with grazing the goats in the open grasslands and singing to himself and his goats the *pinyari* and *gangaur* songs[92].

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[88] An Indian sweet made from simmer-boiled thickened milk, rice and sugar.

[89] A commonly made curry of spiced gravy of light consistency made from sour curd and gram powder.

[90] Literally means a story and is used to describe the recitation of devotional mythological and religious stories.

[91] These are gatherings for devotional songs that last for the whole night.

[92] Two popular Rajasthani folk songs.

After a while, a learned saint happened to visit Jobner. People flocked to his discourses in the vast open ground. His persuasive exposition of religion and god's omnipotence left people spellbound.

One day Gheesu's grandmother and the village headman reasoned with him. "Dearest Gheesu, at least go and visit the saint once. Virtually, the whole village turns up every day to get his blessings and listen to his discourses with rapt attention. Can you not spare even a day's time to get his blessings?"

Gheesu retorted, "Who will take the goats for grazing if I go every morning to listen to the saint? The villagers will forget listening to the saint's discourses if they were themselves required to take their goats for grazing to the forest. However, you are the respected headman of the village and she my revered grandmother. I will therefore not want to be discourteous to you both. I promise that I will surely go and visit the saint at least once."

Next day, Gheesu had taken the goats to the forest. As usual, he carried a big wooden staff for herding the goats. With the staff slung across his shoulder, he was traversing a forest footpath, happily singing the *gangaur* tune.

When he forgot the next stanza of *gangaur* he effortlessly switched to singing *pinyari*.

He had not finished his singing when he saw the learned saint, holding his *tamboora*,[93] approaching him from the other direction. Gheesu thought to himself that this was a good godsend of an opportunity to seek his blessings. After all, he had to redeem his promise to the village headman and his grandmother. It will also spare him the trouble of coming and going to the saint's discourse ground. He quickly made up his mind that he would rather bow before him there and then. Therefore, he started running towards the saint.

The saint was scared to see an unknown person with a big staff running towards him. He was so terrified that he turned back and started running in the direction away from Gheesu. It made a strange sight of the saint running with his *tamboora* with Gheesu in hot pursuit. When the saint saw that Gheesu was catching up with him, he threw his *tamboora* aside and began running even faster. Seeing the saint throw his *tamboora*, almost instinctively Gheesu too threw his staff.

When the saint saw that the person chasing him had thrown his staff and was running towards him with folded hands, he felt relieved and stopped.

Still panting, Gheesu came alongside him and said, "Amazing, *guruji*,[94] amazing! I see little evidence of any miraculous powers in you. Is your God also so ineffective? At least show me what does your God look like?"

The saint was taken aback. He said, "Brother! To see God you need to have dedication and for dedication, you need to have a teacher. Without a teacher, there is no knowledge and without knowledge, there is no God. To have a chance to have a glimpse of God, I too worship him. Only then will God appear for us to have a glimpse."

Gheesu was incredulous and said, "Is that all? For such a frivolous thing, you have to roam from place to place? Make me your teacher. I cannot show you God, but yes, I can give you lots of milk to drink! I have plenty of goats at home."

The saint had no answer. He was thinking of a way to shake off this unusual rustic character. He said, "I have already found my teacher. Now you too need to find someone as your teacher." Saying this, he turned to go.

Gheesu quickly caught him by his hand and said, "Where are you running off now? Here and now, I make you my teacher. Now show me God!"

The poor saint was bewildered. He had never come across such a disciple. He was also getting late for his daily discourse. Thousands of people must be waiting there for his preaching. Now what does he do?

The saint tried to talk about other things to free his hand from Gheesu's vice-like grip but Gheesu would not leave him. The saint felt trapped and saw no way to get away. Weary of Gheesu's insistence, the saint pointed his finger to no particular side and said, "See, there is the God. God is great!"

Gheesu said, "Sir, but I can not see any God there!"

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[93] A stringed musical instrument, similar to a *sitar*.

[94] Guru is a teacher or a preacher. *Ji* as a suffix is a sign of respect.

"There, silly! There!" said the saint, now pointing his finger in a very specific direction. Gheesu said, "Sir, that is only a mole[95]!" In response, the saint burst into laughter and said, "Lord Shiva disguises himself in numerous forms for his devotees. I have now shown you God. That is all. My job is over. Now it is between you and your God. Now you can chant Shiva, Shiva ..." And the saint hastily walked away.

"Gheesu watched the mole running. The saint's words were still reverberating in his ears. Then, as if on second thoughts, he ran after the mole. The mole started running away and Gheesu started chasing it in hot pursuit. After running for some distance, the scared mole hid itself in a burrow at the bottom of a tree.

Gheesu tried very hard to drive the mole out of the burrow but all in vain. Gheesu now stuck his wooden staff into the burrow and left it there. Then he hurriedly brought a shovel and an axe. He pulled out the staff and put it aside. Chanting Shiva, Shiva, .. he began excavating the burrow. For quite some time, he continued digging while continuously chanting Shiva, Shiva, .. He was determined to bring his God out! He had no ill feelings for the mole in his heart. His speech and efforts were both selfless - free of any selfish interests.

Gheesu was sweating hard. Drops of sweat were glistening on his forehead. He wiped them off with his towel. And lo and behold! In a fraction of a second, the mole jumped out of its burrow and ran off. Gheesu ran after it, saying, "Lord, you can give a slip and make fool of your other devotees and run away, but not me. This time you have a determined and strong devotee to contend with."

The terrified mole quickly jumped into another burrow under a nearby tree. But Gheesu was not the one to give up so easily. He began excavating this burrow too. He kept digging, all the time also chanting Shiva, Shiva, .. with total dedication. As a result of the long and strenuous digging, his hands started bleeding.

At this time, up there, Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati were resting on Mount Kailash[96]. Lord Shiva was reciting tales from *Ramayana*[97] and Goddess Parvati was listening to him very attentively. Suddenly blood started oozing from Lord Shiva's palm. Hurriedly Lord Shiva rose and walked towards Nandi[98].

Surprised Goddess Parvati asked, "Lord! What is the matter? Where are you off to?"

Lord Shiva replied, "My devotee is remembering me with unflinching dedication. In his bid to find me, his hands are bleeding from continuous shoveling. Since my devotee is selfless in seeking me and his hands are bleeding, my hand is also bleeding. Dear Parvati, you know I can go to any extent and do anything for such a selfless devotee."

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[95] A small insectivorous mammal about 5 ½ inches long and a tail of 1 inch with velvety fur, minute eyes, and very broad forefeet adapted for digging and burrowing.

[96] It is a mountain in Tibet and is considered to be the abode of Lord Shiva. It is one of the holiest sites of pilgrimage for Hindus.

[97] An extremely popular Hindu mythological epic.

[98] In Hindu mythology, it is the name of the Lord Shiva's bull that he rides for his extra-terrestrial travels.

Goddess Parvati was not quite convinced of such absolute dedication. She taunted Lord Shiva, "Why don't you admit that you would like to go for a ride on Nandi. Who remembers Shiva in this age of *Kaliyug*?"[99]

When Lord Shiva repeated his belief about the absolute devotion of the devotee, Goddess Parvati got very annoyed. She said, "You wait here at Mount Kailash! I will first go and test the devotion of this disciple." And with that Goddess Parvati with her divine powers appeared on earth before Gheesu.

In a small village near Jobner, a woman by name Dhania used to live. She was very talkative and would very often talk to Gheesu as well. Talking was her second nature. It was a deeply ingrained habit with her. It appeared as if her digestive juices would not start flowing until she had incessantly talked. Every now and then when she was in the forest to collect firewood, she would join Gheesu and would pester him with her mostly irrelevant talk. Gheesu would be bored with her meaningless and unstoppable chatter and would have hard time shaking her off.

Goddess Parvati was now standing before Gheesu. With his head down, Gheesu was doggedly digging. Blood was flowing from his hands. And he was chanting Shiva, Shiva ... Goddess Parvati now asked him, "Who are you remembering?"

Gheesu had hardly any visitors in the forest. He was drained out physically and mentally. When he heard a female voice, he presumed that was Dhania again who had come to pester him with her ceaseless chatter. Clearly showing his irritation, without even looking up, he sarcastically said, "Who else? I am remembering your *gharwala*[100]...Go...Go .. Send him."

Goddess Parvati was amazed. She rushed back to Mount Kailash. She reported to Lord Shiva, "You were absolutely right. Lord, he is indeed your true devotee. Without pause, he is chanting Shiva, Shiva, ... Blood is flowing from his hands. Moreover, he did not even look at me but knew who I am. He said go and send your *gharwala*. Lord! The people of earth call the husbands of their women as their *gharwalas*. You can not ignore his total devotion and have to surely go to him."

Lord Shiva smiled. *Ganesha*[101] was playing with *Nandi*. So, Lord Shiva appeared alone on the earth and quietly stood before Gheesu.

Blood stained Gheesu was still busy digging the earth. The sound of his chants of Shiva, Shiva, .. was reverberating in the forest. Gheesu looked up. He saw that a rather strangely dressed man was standing there. With ash-covered body, a live snake

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[99] In the age cycle of Hindu thought, there are four yugas e.g., *Krita-yug, Treta-yug, Dwapar-yug* and the current *Kaliyug* each of very long duration. These yugas decrease successively in excellence and righteousness of man-kind. In *Kaliyug*, man-kind has acquired most vices and immoral attributes.

[100] *Gharwala* literally means master of the house. For a woman, *gharwala* is used to refer to her husband.

[101] In Hinduism, Ganesha is the god of wisdom and problem-solving who is the son of Shiva and Parvati and is represented as a pot-bellied man with an elephant's head.

curling around his neck, dense locks of hair, crescent on his hair locks and wearing a lion cloth of deerskin at his waist, he appeared to Gheesu like a weird buffoon. An amused Gheesu burst into laughter and said, "Brother! *Holi*[102] and splashing of colours is still far away. Why have you dressed like this at this time?"

Lord Shiva smiled and said, "I am Shiva! Lord Shiva, the one you are remembering."

"I have seen many such Gods. My friend, Rajua, becomes Krishna in *raslila*[103], and *Sita*[104] in R*amlila*[105]. Yes,...but I must admit, he has never become Shiva. I must say you look a true joker." And he again got busy in his work.

Lord Shiva was perplexed. He smiled. "Alright brother, I am a joker. But at least tell me how does your God look like? I will also like to know."

Gheesu now put his axe aside and said, "My God have four legs, two bright little eyes, a long tail and long sharp teeth. It has quivering nostrils covered with hair. Finally, its colour is black. Now do you get it?"

"Do you mean to say that your God looks like a mole?"

"Yes! Yes! Absolutely! You got it right. He looks exactly like a mole." And Gheesu again returned to his excavation and still chanting Shiva, Shiva, ...

With his divine powers, Lord Shiva quickly adopted the form of a mole. After some time when Gheesu looked up, he saw a mole sitting at a distance in front of him. Quickly dropping his axe, he hurried towards the mole. He was extremely surprised that this time the mole did not attempt to run away. Instead, it sat there, staring and smiling at him. As an instinctitive gesture of worship, Gheesu swiftly took off his turban and gently kept it at the feet of the mole.

Then he hastily ran to the saint. He virtually dragged the saint back with him and pointing his finger towards the mole, said, "Guruji! Look! I have seen God. If you also want to see him, this is your chance. You can thereafter handle your God yourself. I am getting late to take my herd for grazing to the forest." And without waiting for an answer, he retrieved his turban and put it back on his head. The hefty mole continued to sit there.

Gheesu put his axe on his shoulder, picked up his staff and marched off.

The saint again burst into laughter. He looked at the mole and said to himself, "Learned people are right! God alone is the saviour of such innocent people. Saints and

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[102] the Hindu festival of spring. As part of the celebrations, people spray colored water over each other.

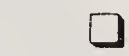
[103] Refers to the amorous garden dance of Lord Krishna with his *gopis (women infatuated with Krishna)* With his divine powers, Lord Krishna created an illusion for each *Gopi* that during the *Raslila*, he was dancing with her.

[104] Consort of Lord Rama in the mythological classic Ramayana.

[105] Theatrical rendition of the mythological classic Ramayana.

philosophers cannot explain things to these people. Only these innocent people can take a mole for a God and a God for a mole!"

The saint saw that the God of Innocents had now vanished. He also pensively walked back to his village abode.



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